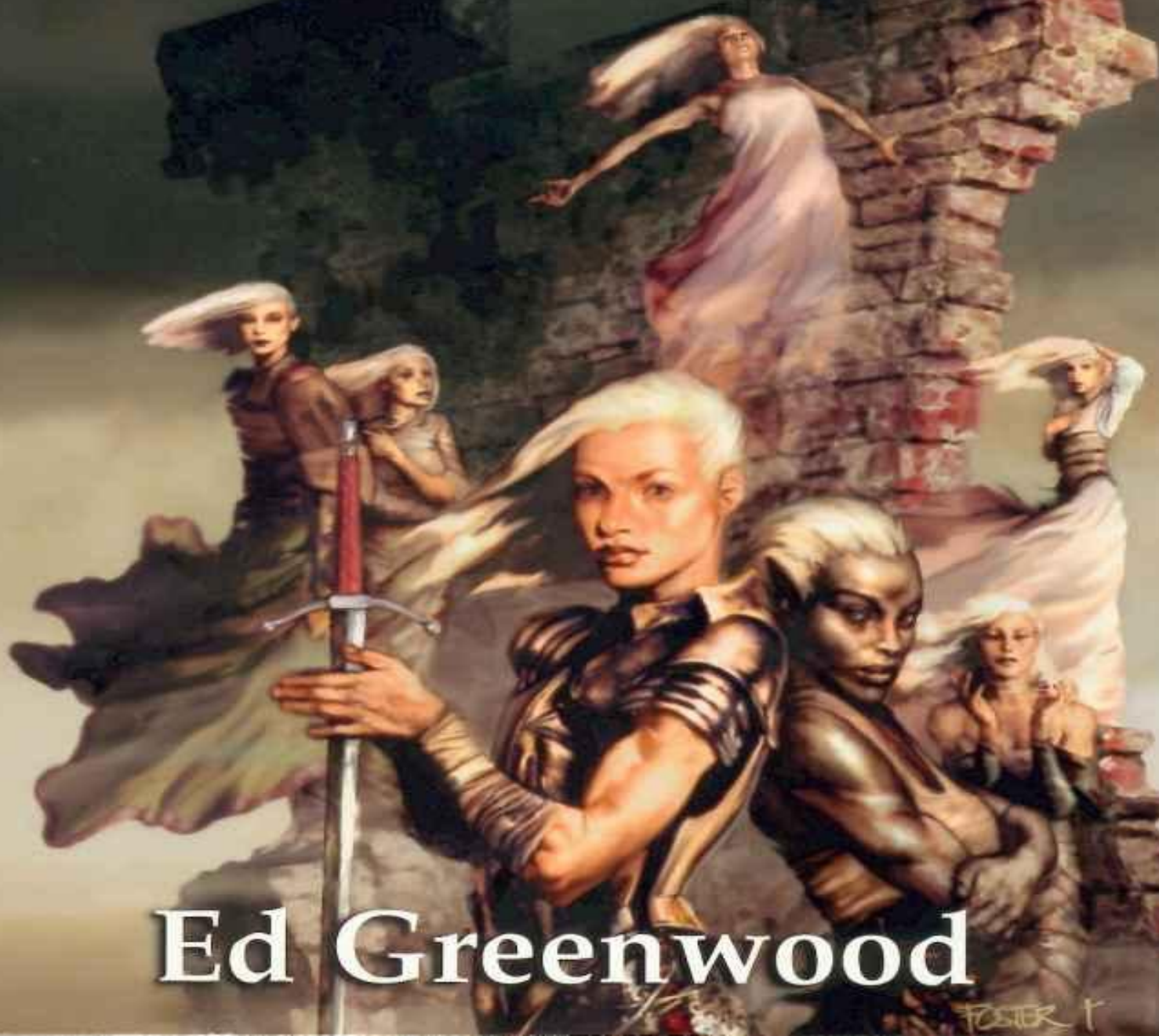


FORGOTTEN REALMS

# Silverfall

Stories of the Seven Sisters



Ed Greenwood

# ***Silverfall: Stories of the Seven Sisters Ed Greenwood***

## ***Prologue***

*Rise, and be not afraid.*

*I have no need to be feared. I am more of a goddess than that. Look upon me, and know Magic.*

*I am Mystra.*

*Priests may prattle of this god or that, but over what mortals of Toril call "magic"—because they understand it not—there is no other.*

*I am the Weaver, the Road Ascending, the One True Way.*

*Terrible I must be, all too often, and the mortals whom I so love—for I was one of you, not so long ago—often cry out at me, or entreat me to work magic for them, or unfold all its mysteries to them at once, like a child who desires all that is good to eat to appear upon his platter in an instant.*

*And if I gave the mysteries that are mine to nurture and keep, unfolded and bright in all their myriad glory, who among mortals could behold them and remain sane?*

*Aye, think on that, and for the love I bear you and all your kind, leave off cowering. I smite or give aid as I see needful, not in whatever wise trembling supplicants—or those who threaten—desire to move me.*

*When you feel lonely, or lost, and think dark magics raised against you, remember this moment. Feel the weight of my power, as it flows—not turned against you, but so vast that it could sweep you away, cries unheard, in an effortless instant. My power, bent upon you as I regard you now . . . and touched and awed by it, you yet live. I am always here, all about you. You are never truly alone. I flow wherever life flows, wherever winds blow and water runs and the sun and moon chase each other, for there is magic in all things.*

*This vast, ever-changing, living Weave is a tapestry of power beyond the minds of mortals, though with each passing year my work gives me back bright payment, and those who work magic can do a little more, and see a little more.*

*Yet those who can see and work with much more than most are rarely sane. The power burns them, twists them, and makes all that is flawed and mean greater. Wherefore we have cruel tyrants, liches walking beyond death who desire to destroy or use all that lives, and wild-eyed dreamers who think that to reshape all Toril to their own visions is to master it. We have lands of mages who destroy or ruin more than they ever raise up; we have doom and devastation, and lives wasted or shattered. Mortals know the pain of such darkness, but I share it. I have the work of banishing the gloom and seeking to temper the blades that are mortal souls so that each time they can take a little more, do a little more, see a little more.*

*In this work, my hands are manyfold, thanks to the few mortals who can see and work with more Art, and remain sane—or, as some of them have put it, "sane enough."*

*I deem these rare few, if they will serve me, my Chosen. And they are rare. Mortals are so easily bent to willfulness by power, so easily broken into tools I can no longer use, for I work with love, and must be served willingly, by those who love me. I shall not compel service, ever. I will not become what my predecessor did, in the despair of her long waiting. I shall give, with love, and never cease in my giving.*

*The power I oversee, because of its might, is a danger to mortals, to gods, and to Toril. All three may be blighted or ruined if the Weave is torn or misused enough. I stand against that. I am the Guardian of the Weave, and its lover. Those who serve me must be the very best of mortals, so that they blunder little, and love the Weave as much as I do,*

*coming to understand it as best they can—and far better than others.*

*Chosen do my work best when they feel my hand but lightly; when they feel free to move and act as mortals do, finding their own vision of the Weave, and serving me in their own ways.*

*Chosen are not easy to find. Chosen are so special that I have managed to keep no more than a bare two handfuls of those my predecessor raised to their station. The greatest work of my predecessor—the Mystra who was not once a mortal who took the name "Midnight"—was the birthing of Chosen she could not find, and so had to make.*

*I speak of the Seven Sisters, born under Mystra's hand, to be the sort of mortals she needed, and that I need even more these days. Mortals are wondrous, complex things; my own power is not yet risen enough that I dare attempt to make or bear Chosen as she did . . . wherefore I look endlessly about Toril, seeking fitting mortals who have arisen on their own.*

*I watch over all who work with the Weave, or meddle in its workings. I watch most those who fascinate me with their daring, their accomplishments, their characters ... or their love. I watch these Seven often, almost as much as the old rogue who kept my predecessor's power in the time of her passing, and gave it so willingly to me. She lives on in him, and in me.*

*She lives on more splendidly still in those who could be termed her daughters: the seven mortal women who share a sex, silver hair, beauty, and wits. They have outlived most mortals, and still enter each day with gusto, a constant delight to me. My only disappointment is that they do not work together more often.*

*Yet once in a passing while—in particular, when I nudge them ever so gently from behind all the curtains of concealment I can spin—they do ... and I love to watch them at work.*

*Watch them with me now.*

*Aye, my eyes shine. When I was a mortal, I wish I'd lived as these magnificent ladies of mine do.*

*I am Mystra, and to you all I give this gift . . . the Seven Shining of my Chosen. Aye, I weep; whatever you may think, mortal, it is a gift given with Love.*

**Dove**  
**No More in Armor for My Sake**

*No sword of war lay long idle in her hand.*

**Aldreth, High Harp of Berdusk**

from the ballad *A Dove At Dawn*  
composed circa the Year of the Lost Helm

Sometimes Mirt had his private suspicions that the magic of the ring didn't work at all.

He thought that right now, for instance, on an all-too-warm spring day in the Year of the Gauntlet as he stumbled through the moist and uneven green dimness of a forest sane folk never dared enter. The damp leaves were slippery underfoot, and he was getting too old for creeping about on uneven ground in deep gloom. He fetched up against perhaps his hundredth tree this afternoon, ramming it solidly with his shoulder, and growled in pain.

Well, at least it made a change from wheezing for breath. The fattest working merchant in all the city of Waterdeep shook his head ruefully at the thought of lost strength and slimness—gone thirty years, and more, ago—and waved his arms in frantic circles like a startled chicken so as to find his balance. When he won that battle he strode on, his old, worn boots flopping.

A serpent raised a fanged head in warning on the vast, moss-cloaked trunk of a fallen tree ahead, and the Old Wolf gave it a growl worthy of his namesake. What good are enchanted rings that quell all nonvocal sounds one makes, and allow one to slip through ward-spells unnoticed, if one still lumbers about like a bull in a mud-wallow . . . and the ring-spells do nothing about the confounded heat?

Mirt wiped sweat out of his eyes with a swipe of his sleeve as he watched the snake glide away in search of a

more secluded spot to curl up in. He was wheezing again. Gods curse this heat—wasn't deep forest shade supposed to be cool?

A rattlewings started up in alarm under his boots, whirring away through the gloom in a squawking welter of wings. Mirt sourly watched it go, threw up his hands—so much for stealth—and plunged on through the damp leaf mold, spiderwebs, and mushrooms.

Oh, aye—and thorn bushes. Never forget the thorn bushes. They had their own abrupt and painful ways of making sure of that. The fat merchant growled again as he tore free of a barbed, biting tangle—not his first this day—leaving some of his blood behind, and stumped on through the endless forest. Why by all the gods had a Chosen of Mystra—who could have anything she damned well wanted—sought out such a far and hidden place, anyway?

Because she wants—needs—to be alone, he thought, and I am come to shatter the peace that must be so precious to her.

Mirt growled again at the thought, and waved a hand in anger. Sweat was dripping off his nose again, running down his face like a brook, more salty stickiness than water.

*"Puhwaugh"*

Mirt found himself spitting out a moth that had darted into his mouth amidst his wheezing. Now he was eating insects. Grand, indeed.

Sweating and stumbling, the only fat merchant for miles—or so he hoped—lumbered on up a slippery slope of mosses and little leaf-filled hollows, gained the top of a ridge . . . and stopped abruptly, catching at a tree for support as he stared down at what lay ahead.

His jaw dropped open. Oh, he'd known there'd be a dell in the trees somewhere hereabouts, warded and hidden, with Dove Falconhand in it. And here 'twas, without the singing of shattered wards or any magic menacing him. Evidently the ring was working after all.



An eerie blue light of magic pulsed down in the dell, radiance that spun like sparkling mists around a strange dance. A woman taller than Mirt was dancing in midair, her booted feet almost his height off the ground, whirling with smooth grace in an endless flowing of limbs and swirling silver hair.

Gods, but she was beautiful! The Old Wolf growled deep in his throat, like the animal he was named for, as he watched her dance held aloft by her own magic. Her shoulders were as broad as his, their sleek rippling making light play and gleam along the shining plates of her full suit of black and silver armor. She wore neither gauntlets nor helm, but was otherwise encased in war steel, all slender curvaceous strength and long, strong legs. Her height and deft grace made her seem smaller and more slender than she truly was—not a squat, burly swordswinger like Mirt, not even "buxom"... but in truth, she overmatched him in size, reach, and probably strength. Her unbound silver hair flowed with her, licking and dancing about her shoulders. Her dark brows arched in concentration as she watched her deadly, moaning partners.

Dove of the Seven Sisters was not dancing alone. Singing in the air around her were a dozen scabbardless swords, their bared blades cutting the air in whirling dances of their own. Mirt saw runes ripple down their shining flanks, and at least two of them were moaning—one high-pitched, one lower—as they spun through air that crackled with power. In the heart of their deadly ballet, Dove Falconhand was singing, low and wordlessly, her voice quickening and growing louder.

A darting sword point struck sudden sparks from Dove's armor then whirled away. Mirt was still watching its tumbling flight in wonder when two blades slashed at the dancing woman, their steel shrieking in protest along the curves of her armor. Without thinking, the Old Wolf pushed away from his tree and stumbled forward, almost pitching onto his face



as he caught one boot heel in a tree root, Dove's song was insistent now, almost hungry. The swords were circling her and darting in, striking like sharks tearing at a stricken fish. Screams of metal raking metal rose to drown out her keening as Mirt sprinted down the leaf-slick dellside, snatching out his own sword with the vague notion of smashing down the flying blades from the air. Was she caught in some sort of magical trap? A spell that turned her own powers against her to bring her swift death?

He wasted no breath in roaring a warning—in case someone who might be directing the blades would thereby be warned—but Dove soon saw him. Her head turned, mouth opening in surprise, just as a blade slid under the edge of a plate, bit through an unseen strap, and sent the black and silver plate spinning away. Three swords plunged into the gap where the plate had been and Dove stiffened, clawing the air in obvious pain.

Her gasp was almost a sob. It rang in Mirt's ears as the wheezing merchant raced forward, waving his sword. Three blades drew back from the dancing woman, trailing flames of blindingly bright silver, and one of them rang high and clear, like a struck bell. It sounded almost triumphant.

"Blazing . . . gods . . . above!" Mirt panted, swinging his sword at one of the flying blades so hard that when he missed he found himself staggering forward helplessly, about to kiss the ground again. "Dove! Hold you them—I'm coming!"

He fell hard, skidding in soft mud and wet leaves, and his next shout was lost in a mouthful of moss. It tasted terrible.

The swords were racing through the air now, striking sparks from Dove Falconhand's armor when they missed the plume of silvery smoke that marked her wound. She was dancing again, arching her body to the world instead of clasping her hands to where she hurt. Through the sweat that stung his eyes as he wallowed in the forest mold, Mirt

saw her wave at him to stay back. She resumed her dance, seeming almost to welcome and beckon the blades rather than strike them aside. He thought she must be spell-thralled.

Mirt reeled to his feet just as another sword slid into Dove, sinking so deeply it must have gone most of the way through her. He saw it draw back dark and wet, silver smoke boiling away along its length as the dancing woman reeled in midair. He wasn't going to reach her in time.

There was real pain on Dove's face as she met his eyes again and shook her head, waving at him to begone. Mirt stared in horror at a blade racing right at her face. He used one of the precious spells that slumbered in the other ring he wore; a magic to quench magics.

The sword plunged obediently to the ground, bouncing lifelessly to rest—just as two other blades thrust themselves into the silver-haired woman, their quillons clanging against each other as one slid past the other.

Dove gasped, shuddering in the air as her body bent involuntarily around the transfixing steel. Mirt was only a few running strides away now, almost close enough to snatch at those quivering hilts. He had his own sword, two gnarled old hands, and—a dose of irony—the only spells left in his ring were a flight magic, and one that conjured up scores of whirling swords. He'd have to do this the hard way.

A blade slashed at his ear as he lumbered forward to lay his hands on the hilts of the two swords buried in Dove. He'd have to leap up to reach them.

Gods, he was getting too old to jump about like a stag. With a grunt and a gasp, the Old Wolf launched himself into the air, battered old fingers reaching . . .

He was in the air before he saw it. A sword curving up and around from behind the drifting silver smoke, soaring toward him like a hungry needle.

Mirt could do nothing to evade its bright point, and the old, supple leathers he wore would be as butter beneath its

keen strike.

"Must I die like this?" he growled in despair as his leap carried him helplessly on, his fingers still shy of reaching two vibrating pommels.

A wave of magic—obeying a slender, bloodied hand—hurled him back. Mirt saw the dark blade speed between them, its bright edge winking at him, as he locked gazes with Dove again.

There was calm reproach in her eyes, and yet a hint of lurking mirth, too ... an instant before her face changed, alarm rising in her eyes again. Something struck him behind and above his ear, hard enough to spin him around and down into an echoing red void, a world that darkened as he tumbled through it, on the slow roll down to death.

Rapture awakened him, greater shuddering pleasure than he'd ever felt before. The low sound he'd been hearing in the dreams that were falling away from him now, receding into forgetfulness like sun-chased mists, was his own endless moan of pleasure as he writhed on his back in the forest mold.

Dove was kneeling above him, clad in a simple white shift, armor and blood and racing blades all gone, one slender, long-lingered hand—dappled with blood no longer—was outspread in the air above his breast, and a gentle smile was tugging at the corners of her lips.

"Wh-what?" Mirt managed to ask, his throat rough. "Lie easy, Old Wolf, and let me finish. You've been a very bad boy, down the years . . . but I suppose you're well aware of that."

Fresh waves of pleasure washed over him before he could reply, and he kicked his heels against the soft moss, needing some sort of release.

"What're you doing to me?" he groaned when he could find breath to shape words again.

"Healing you," Dove replied serenely, holding up something small in her other hand. It glinted between her

fingers as she held it out. "Recognize this?"

Mirt shook his head, gasping as old, long familiar aches melted away. "What is it?"

"Part of someone's sword tip. You've been carrying it around for two score summers or so; that stiffness in your back, remember?"

The fat merchant twisted experimentally. His limbs were as supple as when he was a young lad. "'Tis gone," he rumbled in wonderment, feeling flesh that hardly felt like his, stripped of accustomed pain.

Dove nodded. "That, along with a lot of fat you didn't need, those crawling veins on your legs, a rupture in your gut I could put my hand through, balls of bone built up around your joints . . . and I've forgotten how many places where your bones were broken, or once broken and poorly mended. You might have taken better care of yourself."

"And never been the great lord of adventures I am," Mirt growled up at her, "and so never met you, lady. Nay, I think I chose the right road." He patted at his belly, then ran his fingers over his chin and was reassured to find familiar girth, calluses, and hair. Ah, she hadn't made a boy of him—or, gods, *a girl*—or anything like that.

"No, Old Wolf," Dove murmured reassuringly. "You'll recognize yourself—wrinkles, scars, and all—when next you look in a glass."

Mirt lifted his head for a moment, saw shards of hacked black and silver armor strewn around them in the trampled moss, sighed, and let his head fall back.

"You give me a gift beyond measure," he rumbled, letting her see the love in his eyes. Then, because he had to, he added bluntly, "Why?"

Dove nodded, her smile gone now. "Because, in your own way, you serve Faerun as I do—a service for which you are all too unlikely to be otherwise thanked. I could hardly leave you to bleed to death in the center of my Dancing Place when you'd taken your wound trying to protect me."

She folded her fingers as if closing an unseen book, and acquired an impish smile as she drew her hand back from above his breast. "Even if doing so would greatly please a large and ever growing host of folk spread all across the continent of Faerun."

Mirt grunted at that and snaked out a hand to touch her knee. A surge of power washed through him, as if he'd been touched by a spell. His entire body jumped ere something happened inside Dove Falconhand, and the flow was cut off as if cut by a knife . . . leaving him holding a knee. A shapely knee, but mere flesh and bone now, not some storage keg of stirring magic.

"My, but we're greedy," said the silver-haired woman in calm tones, firmly disengaging his stout fingers, with a hand that—for all its smooth slenderness—was stronger than his.

She rose in a single graceful movement and stood looking down at him. "I can see a question or three fairly bursting out of you," she said with a smile, and wordlessly beckoned forth his speech with two imperiously hooked fingers.

Mirt looked up at the woman who could kill him with just one of several dozen even smaller gestures, and asked in a raw, bemused voice, "If it pleases you to tell me, lady, I must know this: why, before all the gods, were you dancing with a dozen swords?"

She held out a hand to help him rise, Mirt rolled to a sitting position, marveling at a strength and a physical ease he'd not felt in himself for thirty winters, and took that proffered hand. He barely needed it, and stood flexing his arms in sheer pleasure.

"All of us Chosen," she replied gently, as they stood together in a glade where eerie spell-glow, drifting smoke, or darting sword kept the calling birds at bay no longer, "have our own magical pursuits—hobbies, even 'secret schemes,' if you will. What you blundered into was one of mine."

"I'm deeply sorry that I did so," the old merchant said quickly, "even if it did win me years of hurts healed. I—"

Dove laid two gentle fingers across his lips. "Please don't babble more thanks at me, Mirt. I have too few friends and too many admiring worshipers." Her lips twisted. "They almost outnumber the foes who'd dance on my dead body with glee."

The Old Wolf nodded. "Then say on about your dancing and the swords, lady," he bade gently.

"My name is Dove ... or to certain angry Lords of Waterdeep, 'Clever Bitch,' " the silver-haired woman told him serenely, and Mirt flushed scarlet to the very tips of his ears.

"Ah, now, lass, I meant it not. Gods, 'twas years back, that! And how could you have heard me clear across the city? 'Twas just th—"

Those fingers tapped his lips again. "Just call me Dove, hmm? I hope you'll have sense enough not to cavort around like a youngling in days to come, or speak of what happened here. I don't want to end up leading a procession of wrinkled-skin lordlings around the North, all of them pleading to be made vigorous again. Nor do I want parties of axe-wielding, torch-bearing idiots blundering around in this forest seeking a glade where magic swords can be found flying around."

"Lady," Mirt said gravely, "you have my wor—I-I mean *Dove*, I promise you I'll tell no one at all. Truly."

Dove nodded, her eyes studying his face a trifle sadly. She was not smiling.

"Is—is anything wrong?" Mirt asked anxiously.

Dove shook her head. "Memories, Old Wolf, are personal gems ... or curses. I was just remembering another man who used almost the same words you just did, and what became of his promise—and him. And before you ask, no, I won't tell you his name or fate."

The old merchant spread helpless hands and took a restless stride away from her. "Of course not, great lady. Is there anything I can do for y—"

A firm hand took hold of his arm and turned him around. "Hear the secret you sought, and keep it," she replied simply. "Mirt, you saw no hostile spell at work on me, but merely my own sloth. I was enhancing the enchantments of those blades the easy way, by borrowing powers from one to echo into another. I do such augmentations at Mystra's bidding, making the magic I spawn last by means of my own blood."

"The silver fire that legends speak of," Mirt whispered. "Tears of Mystra . . . the blood of the Seven."

Dove nodded. "The Lady Steel used to do sword dances—alone, in remote forest glades—to swiftly transform blades of minor enchantment into duplicates of a more formidable weapon. I thought others avoided such practices because of the danger and their dislike of pain, but I've discovered another reason."

She waved a hand at the scattered armor, "That is now twisted in its magic," she explained. "What some folk called 'cursed.'"

Mirt nodded. "And if you hadn't worn it?"

"You'd have found my body lying here with a dozen swords in it," she replied calmly, "or blown to blood and dust. That many enchantments at once would hamper my own powers in strange ways."

The fat merchant looked down at the scattered fragments of black and silver steel again and Dove smiled thinly. "There are those who feel far too many Chosen of Mystra walk the face of Toril these days," she said. "This is one secret you'd best not spill with your over-loose tongue."

The Old Wolf shook his head. "And you trust me .. ." he murmured in wonder. He shook his head again, then cleared his throat and said formally, "Dove Falconhand, know that I will obey you in anything. You have but to call on me."



The silver-haired woman regarded him soberly and said, "Be careful, Mirt. I may one day collect on that promise—and my calling may cost you your life."

Mirt kept his eyes on hers as he went to his knees. "La—Dove, I will answer that call right gladly, even if it comes with the clear promise of my death. We must all die ... and in your service seems to me a goodly way to go."

Dove shook her head and turned away, but not before Mirt saw what might have been tears in her eyes. When she spoke again, however, her voice was calm and composed. "Words spoken near death tend to lay bare the heart more than grand and formal promises. Forgive me if I wonder aloud why a man so eager to promise me his death now, cried out as he did, earlier, just before he was struck down?"

The Old Wolf nudged a piece of armor with the scuffed toe of one of his boots and replied, "If die I must, I'd rather it not be in the throes of my own mistake, or a calamity I've caused. That's why I spake thus, then." He looked up at her, discovered her eyes steady upon him, and added quietly, "You're waiting for another answer, though, Lady Falconhand . . . aren't you?"

She smiled and almost whispered three words: "Lady? Clever Bitch."

Mirt smiled ruefully. "*Dove*," he began carefully, "know that I came looking for you because I knew of both your skills and the approximate location of this your Dancing Place, though nothing of how or why you danced."

The silver-haired woman made a cycling motion with her left hand, bidding him say on.

Mirt drew in a deep breath, let it out in a sigh, and began to speak in a rush, as if emptying himself of a heavy burden. "As you know, I've been a rather busy merchant for some years. I've done business with many folk in most cities between here and the Sea of Fallen Stars. I'm known professionally to a score of men, or more. In Scornubel,

perhaps ten times that many trust me with some secrets, or seek my counsel."

Dove bent her head and regarded him sidelong. "And what currently troubles bustling Scornubel?" she asked softly.

Mirt threw back his head in thought, framing his next words, and caught sight of one of the flying swords. It was hanging motionless in midair above the lip of the dell, pointed toward him and half hidden among tree branches. He turned his head and saw another, and another, hanging silent in a deadly ring.

Waiting.

He looked back at Dove's calm face, and said, "Lady, please understand that alliances and formal pacts in the Caravan City come and go with the passing hours, not merely by the day or tenday. Few of my contacts there habitually trust or confide in each other. In the matter that brought me here they spoke to me separately, each driven by his own fear."

Dove nodded and he continued, "Folk have been slow to realize this, and therefore we can't say with any surety as to when it began or how widespread 'tis. Scornubel is experiencing a stealthy influx of drow."

Dove raised an eyebrow. Drow. Most humans of Faerun had an almost hysterical fear of the dark elves.

The evil, spider-worshiping Ones Who Went Below cleaved from their fairer elf brethren millennia ago to descend under the earth and dwell there. Vicious and stealthy, masters of fell sorcery whose skins were the color of the blacksmoke obsidian sold in Tashlutan bazaars, the drow were a mysterious race, all but unseen but for the rare, terrible nights when they crept up to the surface to raid, cruelly slaughtering at will. Drow never stayed above, for fear of their magic losing its efficacy and finding every creature's hand raised against them. So how were they invading Scornubel? Burrowing up under warehouses to

make a building above seem part of their dark realms below?

"Drow are *dwelling* in Scornubel?" she asked.

Mirt shrugged and said, "It seems someone is giving the dark-skins the magical means to adopt the shapes of humans—for months or tendays, not mere hours—and they're then practicing copying human ways, speech, and mannerisms. At times, various merchants have told me, 'tis like talking to a bad actor lampooning a grasping horse monger or an oily dealer in scents . . . and 'tis chilling, if you know the merchant well and were joking with him only a day or two before."

The silver-haired ranger nodded. "Folk of Waterdeep tend to suspect dopplegangers when they encounter such impostors," she observed. "Why then are you so sure these are drow?"

Mirt spread his hands. "I know no details, but at least two mages learned so with their spells. One left the city shortly thereafter; the other's not been seen for a little more than two tendays now."

"And the drow are taking the likenesses of—watch-blades? Lord inspectors? The richest moneylenders?"

The Old Wolf shook his shaggy head. "One Scornubrian merchant company or family, then another, not local authorities. Their purpose, if they share one, is as yet unknown. They seem uninterested in seizing control of the city, but very interested in gaining control of its most important shipping and caravan concerns. We don't know if the humans they displace are enslaved or simply slain. There've been no bodies found—and they seem to take the places of everyone in a target family, down to the children and chamber servants."

"While I can see no good in this," Dove said slowly, "I've little stomach for slaughtering my way through a city of drow—and starting wildfire rumors that will bring about the deaths, one way and another, of many 'suspected drow' in

cities all over Faerun. I serve Mystra, not the Lords' Alliance or some 'humans over all others' creed."

The fat merchant nodded. "I expect no whelmed Harper army to descend on Scornubel this season, or next. . . I just want to know *why*."

Dove frowned, then smiled wryly. "An eternal human need," she commented, "wherefore we have a grand variety of altars across this world, and others."

Mirt stood looking at her anxiously, like a dog awaiting either kind words or a kick. When she saw his face, the silver-haired ranger smiled and strode forward to clasp his forearms, as one warrior to another. "Your journey wasn't wasted, Old Wolf. Someday soon, if I can, I'll tell you a story set in Scornubel."

The fat merchant smiled as she patted his shoulder, then he turned back to her and asked curiously, "Do you—Dove, tell me—do you ever grow tired of racing around Faerun righting wrongs and setting the crooked straight?"

They stared into each other's eyes for a long, silent time, and Mirt was shaken by the sadness and longing she let him see before she smiled, shrugged, and replied, "It's what I am, and what I do."

She turned away then, the folds of her shift swirling around her bare feet, and added briskly, "Return to Waterdeep, Lord Mirt. Follow me not, nor linger over-long in this place."

She strode across the trampled moss to where rising ground marked one edge of her dell, and turned to look back over her shoulder at him severely.

"And don't let your invigorated body make you a young fool again," she told him. "You're not to go looking for other trouble or trying to find again the adventures of your youth. I don't want all of my healing work wasted."

"You condemn me to a life of boredom," Mirt protested, half seriously.

Dove's merry laugh rang out across the dell. "Would it be impolite, my lord, to remind you how much some folk of Faerun would give to enjoy such boredom?"

Without waiting for an answer she moved her hands in two quick gestures, and spell-glow filled the dell once more, blue-white and swirling, as the swords she'd danced with flew down from their hovering stations to swirl around her.

Mirt took a step toward her, opening his mouth to speak, then came to a halt. He'd seen that warning gesture before, and tasted a sword blade when he ignored it. The blades boiled up around Dove Falconhand in a bright blue whirlwind that rose a trifle off the ground, snarled up into a furious spiral, then all at once vanished, leaving a fat merchant blinking at emptiness beneath the trees.

All at once, the birds began calling again. Mirt stood on the trampled moss facing no swords, spell-glow, nor barefoot Chosen of Mystra.

"Ah, lass—?" he asked the empty air. "Dove?" Silence was his only reply. A rattlewings came swooping heavily across the dell and veered aside with a squawk of alarm when it realized that the motionless tree trunk ahead was in truth a human engaged in the rare occupation of standing still and silent. It flapped on into the forest, crying the fear of its discovery to the world. Mirt turned to watch it go, then turned slowly on one boot heel to survey the dell.

Aside from the deep marks his own boots had left here and there in the mud and the scattered shards of black and silver armor, it looked like any other part of the wild forest.

Might Dove have left magic hidden here, buried close to the surface where she could readily find it? Well, it wouldn't hurt to just look . . .

Even as Mirt put his hands to an upthrust, helm-shaped clump of moss, the air around him sang in high, clear warning, and the ring that allowed him to pass wards unchallenged throbbed upon his finger.

Ah, well. Mirt shrugged, smiled, and straightened up. "Clever bitch," he told the dell affectionately.

When he bent again to take up a shard of armor the air around him almost screamed, but despite the danger its skirling promised, the Old Wolf stood turning it in his hands, lost in unhurried thought for some time before he stooped to gather all of the armor plates and carefully stack them against a rock. He covered them with other stones to keep them from weathering overmuch, took a last, long look around, and started the long walk back to Waterdeep.

In a certain corner of the plains city of Scornubel, overly curious visitors can find a narrow, nameless passage that plunges from a garbage-strewn back alley down a short and slippery way to an open cesspool. The only folk who customarily visit this noisome spot are hairy, reeking men in old carts, who come to empty barrels of night soil. Rats often scurry along the walls of the passage, but on this particular afternoon one of them was quite surprised to see the empty, dung-smeared cobbles ahead of it suddenly grow a gnarled old woman. She appeared out of empty air an inch or so above the cobbles, holding a cane. With a grunt she slammed to the ground with a clatter, and quite nearly fell over.

Reeling upright, this aged bundle of rags cast a level look around, seeking to find anyone who might have seen her arrival, then settled her cane into a bony hand. She stumped up the passage into the alley beyond, spitting thoughtfully in the rat's direction. The rodent blinked, and decided to forage elsewhere.

The old woman staggered on around the corner, making slow work of her short trip down the alley. She turned onto a street where the houses were old, cloaked with ivy, and leaned close together among their iron-barred fences and refuse-choked yards. Old and stunted trees thrust weary branches into the late afternoon sky. Many of the houses looked empty. Those who snored within them, huddled in the

corners of empty rooms in clothes no better than the old woman wore, wouldn't awaken until nightfall. The old woman planned to be long gone by then.

She stopped in front of a house ringed by tall stone garden walls capped with a gleaming row of jagged bottle-shards and looked up and down the street, but it seemed empty. The gate, flanked by two squat pillars, was unlocked. The squeal of its opening roused a large black dog in the yard within into a wild fury of barking and howling. It bounded the length of its chain, teeth snapping about an arm's length short of the path that led to the house. The beast kept up its noisy and vigorous threats for the entire length of the old woman's journey to the front door. Straining as it was at the links that held it, someone watching might have been forgiven for expecting the old, moss-girt, leaning statue to which its chain was fastened to topple the rest of the way to the ground and set free one frantic canine.

The old woman knew the length of that chain, though its captive had changed since her last visit, and she didn't spare the dog a glance. Her eyes were on the pair of bored-looking warriors now rising from stools flanking the door, slapping at the hilts of their swords and daggers to ensure these were ready, and staring back at the old woman with barely concealed irritation. One door-sword prudently moved to one side—to be out of range of any spell that might smite his fellow if this old crone turned out to be some sort of sorceress—and stayed on the porch, drawing his dagger to be ready for a throw. The other guard strode forward down the path to bar the old crone's progress a good twenty paces from the porch. "This is a private abode," he announced briskly, "and my master does not make welcome beggars or unsolicited vendors. Would you have other business here, this day?"

"Mmmnh, mmmnh," the old woman said, as if working long unused gums. She turned her head as slowly as any



tortoise might and fixed the doorsword with an eye that was startlingly cold, keen, and blue. "I would."

The guard towered over her, waiting. The old woman blinked at him, and made a "step aside" wave with her rough-knobbed cane.

He stood his ground and prompted with just a hint of testy impatience beneath his smile, "And it would be?"

"Best conducted inside," the old woman rasped pointedly, taking a step forward.

The doorsword stood his ground, clapping a hand to the hilt of his sword. "That's something we'd best discuss," he snapped. "My master has given me very specific instructions as to who should be allowed to disturb him,"

"Lean closer, young bladesman," the stooped woman replied. "I'm supposed to whisper one o' them secret passwords to ye now, see?"

Warily, the doorsword drew his blade, held it like a barrier between them, and leaned forward, eyes narrowed. "Spit at me," he remarked almost pleasantly, "and die."

"Kiss me," the old woman replied, "and be surprised." She was smiling as the guard's startled eyes met hers and he almost drew away. The smile was almost kindly though, and the old woman did have both of hands clearly in view, clasped on the cane at her hip, bony fingers laced together.

She leaned a little closer and whispered hoarsely, "Firebones three."

The guard straightened, astonishment flashing across his face for a long moment before he gulped, became impassive, and said, "Pray forgive the delay I've caused you, lady, and come this way. The house of Blaskar Toldovar welcomes thee."

"Mmmnh, mmmnh," the old woman agreed, setting herself once more into motion. "Thought it would, I did. Thought it would."

She toiled up the steps with some purpose, and smiled and nodded like an indulgent duchess at the two doorswords

as they ushered her within. The house hadn't changed much, though the servant who led her up the long stair flanked with blood-red hangings was a burly warrior now, and not the young lady clad only in chains that she recalled from earlier visits.

He left her in a chair in the usual shabbily genteel, dim room, where she sat in silence, knowing she was being watched through spy holes. It wasn't long before a voice that rasped even more than her own asked out of the darkness behind her chair, "Well?"

"Blaskar," the old woman said, "I need to ask you something, and get an honest answer. I'll need to cast a spell on you, to know that it's truth—and that you're indeed Blaskar Toldovar."

"What? Who *are* you?" The balding man came around the chair in his usual worn and dirty clothes, adjusting an oversized monocle she didn't remember seeing him with before. He leveled his cane at her—the cane that held a mageslaying dart of silver-coated, magic-dead metal in its end—and snapped, "Answer me!"

"You grow short-tempered, old Toldove. Not a good habit, for one of your profession," the old woman observed calmly.

Blaskar Toldovar came to a halt beside a bookcase that faced the old woman's chair; a large and heavy bookcase with a bellpull beside it ... a bellpull the old woman knew summoned no servant, but caused the bookcase to topple forward. The case was hinged in the middle, to bow forward as it emptied its load of ledgers and surely crush anyone sitting in the chair. Blaskar hooked his fingers securely around the bellpull and glared at his visitor.

"Your ledgers won't be improved by getting my old blood all over them," the old woman said, "and I'm not here to harm you. Sit down, be at ease, and pour me a drink, Blaskar—the good stuff, not the rubytart with slavesleep in it."

Blaskar Toldovar stared at the old woman for a moment, breathing heavily, then collapsed onto his desk stool, sending up a cloud of dust that made him sneeze helplessly. When he could see again, he wiped his eyes, settled his monocle into place, and peered at his visitor through it hard and long, thrusting himself forward until he almost fell off the stool.

"No, I don't recognize you," he said at last, with a weary sigh, "but you must know me. I ask again: who are you?"

"I'd prefer not to give you my name," the old woman said tartly, "especially with your man listening behind yon door. Send him away—and *not* into the spy passage."

Blaskar sighed, went to the door, flung it wide, and jerked his head toward the stairs. The impassive servant who'd been listening at the door nodded calmly and strode away.

They listened to his boots descending the steps before Blaskar closed the door again, turned, and said, "I'm a busy man, and you did disturb me at a very delicate task. I must ask you to identify yourself forthwith."

"Busy?" the old woman asked. "I hear no chains, and see no young things lined up for inspection. How can a slaver be busy with no slaves in his house? If you were burying money in the garden, I'd expect to see a shovel and a little sweat."

Blaskar glared at her and opened his mouth to say something—but only shut it with a snap.

"Well?" the old woman asked, eyeing him right back. "Wouldn't you?"

The slaver mastered his temper with visible effort and said shortly, "You know me, and my habits, and yet say you must cast a spell on me to be sure of me! You refuse to give your own name, and sit here insulting me rather than getting to the reason for this social call... and so far as I can tell, I've never seen you before in my life! I refuse to have spells cast on me"—he aimed his cane at her again, and the

old woman saw that he had a row of identical ones in a rack behind his stool— "without knowing who is to cast them, and why. This city is becoming too dangerous for me to extend such trust."

"That," his visitor said in dry tones, "is what I've come to talk to you about. Scornubel seems to be undergoing some changes—or rather, a lot of its citizens are ... aren't they? Something a slaver would know about, hey?"

Blaskar Toldovar went pale and said tightly, "I won't listen to this much longer, whoever you are." The cane trembled in his hand. "I'll warn you once more ..."

"Blaskar," the old woman said gently, "be at ease." She reached with her cane under the chair she was sitting in, fished around, and dragged out something that clanked: two sets of manacles. "Would you feel more comfortable if I put these on?"

Blaskar stared at her, open mouthed, then said slowly, "Yes. Yes, I would. Are you an escaped slave, come back to me for revenge?"

"I'm not here for revenge," the old woman told him, calmly snapping one set of manacles around her ankles. "I'm here for information." She settled the cuffs of the second set around her wrists after propping her cane against one bony knee, and snapped them closed with a clack. "But I won't tell you my name."

The old slaver's eyes narrowed, "Your brand?" he asked.

The old woman nodded, and rolled onto one hip with surprising ease, extending her legs toward the low footstool beside the one Blaskar was sitting on. He kicked it under her feet out of long habit, got up, and extended his cane to her filthy skirts, lifting them up past a green and mottled map of veins until he could see the back of her left knee. He peered, but could see no mark there.

"Is this some sort of game?" he snapped.

"Look again," the old woman said calmly. "The light in here is not good."

The slaver wiped his eyes, then his monocle, and peered again ... and as he stared down at surprisingly clean and milk-white flesh, something faded slowly into view. A familiar mark, and a number . . .

All the color drained from Blaskar Toldovar's face, and he whispered, "Sweet Mystra forbend! You're D—"

"Hush!" the old woman said sharply. "No names!" She rolled over again and Blaskar retreated from her as he would from a rearing viper.

"B-but what's happened to you?" he asked, backing away behind a chair and feeling for the shelf that held his most precious warding magic. "Why are you here?" The old woman held up her manacled wrists and shook them so the chain rattled. "Be at ease, Blaskar, I'm not here to harm you, or take revenge for what you did to a young girl all those years ago. Besides, the master you sold me to was kind and I was his slave for only about two days. I've actually been back here to check on you a dozen times since then ... you just didn't recognize me."

"Spell-shapes," the slaver murmured. "False bodies, like the one you're wearing now."

"Like the ones a lot of folk seem to be wearing in Scornubel these days," the old woman said sharply. "Mind if I cast a spell or two, Blaskar?"

He came beside the chair, and sat on it carefully. Their knees almost touched. "If one of them will shield us from all spying," he said firmly, "I do not mind. We need to talk freely."

"Now we're getting somewhere," the old woman said, shifting forward so that their knees did touch. "That'll be my first spell."

"And the second?"

"The truth telling. I know I'm talking to Blaskar, but I don't know if Blaskar's wits have been played about with, magically."

"Neither," the slaver whispered, his face white again, "do I."

The woman in chains looked into Blaskar's eyes and asked softly, "Would you like me to take you far from here, old Toldove? To a house in Neverwinter where the neighbors have never even seen a dark elf?"

The slaver looked at her with a sudden, fierce hope kindling in his eyes. "Yes!" he cried, and burst into tears. "Oh, yes!"

With a rattle of chain, the old woman put her arms around him in a gentle embrace. "You'd have to give up slaving," she murmured, "forever."

"Lady," he said, sniveling, "I'm too old for it anymore. Bold young men with no fear and sharp knives were giving me troubles long before . . . before this shadow fell on us here."

He sobbed then and she rocked him in her arms, stroking his neck and murmuring wordless comfort.

When at last he mastered his voice again, Blaskar asked roughly, "Lady? What must I do for this rescue to happen?"

"Tell me all you can about the drow here," she said. "That's all."

*"Lady! Your shielding spell! They'll hear—"*

"I cast it," she said gently, "when first you touched me. Be at ease, Blaskar."

The slaver drew in a deep breath, let it out in a shuddering sigh, then gave her a weak smile. "In your arms, I almost think I can do that. My mother used to hold me like that."

He swallowed, and asked, his face very pale, "B-but you're a Harper, aren't you? I thought—I thought you people killed slavers, or made us slaves."

"We do, more often than not," Dove Falconhand replied calmly. "Consider yourself an exception."

"But—oh, gods, I know this is stupid of me, but— why?"

Keen eyes seemed to blaze right through the slaver, and he caught his breath with a fearful gasp.

"Blaskar," the woman he'd once enslaved said quietly, "I've spent most of my life being a hearty, capable lady of the blade. Harder than steel, colder than stone, more merrily rough and foul-mouthed and ruthless than men who live by the sword. I've done it because I've had to. I haven't the magic my sisters can boast, to do my fighting for me. I need time to be soft, to surrender myself... to be with someone I don't have to fear. You showed me such times, more than once. As I said, I've been back to check on you. You've no idea how much I value tenderness and kindness in a man."

They stared into each other's eyes, and all the color slowly ran out of the slaver's face.

"Yes," Dove told him grimly, "I've magic enough to change my own body. I was Emmera, and Sesilde. Callathrae, too, and the little dancer from Tharsult whose name you never learned, who liked to oil herself and dance in a ring of candles. I know your true measure, Blaskar. Slaver you are, yes, and a little too leering for most tastes, though kind in that, too. The cruel and the cold and the slayers you sent in chains to hard-handed buyers in Calimport and like places. The gentle ones you treated gently."

She tilted her head to one side, and seemed to see right through him as she added, "All this time you've been looking for a woman who will cook for you and sleep with you and worship you with her eyes—and not thinking yourself worthy of anyone who passed through your hands that you liked the look of. It took you too long to learn not to judge females by their looks, but you learned it at last, old dog. Almost too late, but you learned it, and the one you had your heart set on growing old with turned out to be a dark elf one night, didn't she? You killed her, didn't you? Just as she must have slain your real beloved—quick, then getting rid of the body in a panic. Since then, you've cowered here



waiting for all the other drow to show up and cut a bloody revenge out of your hide."

The slaver was looking at her like a small boy who'd been caught doing something clever but forbidden and doesn't yet know if he'll be punished or laughed at. He opened his mouth, but said nothing. He didn't have to speak for her to know she was right.

"How many matches did you make, down the years?" Dove asked. "A little coin to the right passing merchant here, after you'd judged him suitable, and off with the chains and another partnership . . . how many times? I know of twelve, but your neck is still within easy reach, Blaskar; how many more?"

The slaver swallowed, held up a hand to buy himself some thinking time, then said slowly, "Twenty-three. I think. Use magic on my mind to be sure, Lady D—ahem, lady. I... I can't avoid any fate you give to me, I guess." He was struggling on the edge of tears again, but he managed to add, "I'm so tired of being afraid."

"That," Dove said in a voice of doom, "is why I won't do to you what I once vowed to: spell-change you into a beautiful lass, chain you, and sell you into slavery to give you a taste of what you did to so many. You've suffered, and there are times when Mystra bids us to rise above 'death for death' justice, and show kindness to those worthy of it. In my eyes, those most worthy of it are those who've been kind to others, in private and with no thought of benefit to themselves. You're one of those few."

A long-fingered hand closed on the throat of the man gaping at her, and she added in a voice of sudden steel, "Yet never forget, Blaskar, that I can make you a slave girl, or legless beggar, or disease-riddled outlaw, wearing the face of someone hated and hunted, in the time it takes me to tell you this. I can come to doom you, if you turn to your old ways once more."

The slaver was trembling. She opened her mouth to say something more gentle, but he lifted his head and said, "I'll submit to whatever doom you choose. If you'd be kind to me, though, let me try to bargain a better one."

Dove snorted. "From how strong a position? What, for instance, would your opening gambit be?"

They exchanged smiles. The slaver's grin turned sly and he asked, "What if I should just happen to forget where I put the key to your cuffs?"

"Then I'll break them," Dove told him, "and help you go looking for that key. You might not be seeing things all that well after I'd stuffed two lengths of chain down your throat and made you swallow, so we'd have to do things properly. I think I'd start by taking firm hold of your ear, then go around behind you and start looking for where I could pull on the other end of my devoured chain."

Blaskar stared at her for a moment, then threw back his head and let out his first real laugh in years.

The same sun that would set over Waterdeep long before a certain fat merchant found his way back to its gates—and would shine through the windows of a certain Scornubrian house now forever empty of Blaskar Toldovar—was lowering in the western sky when a weary, muddy-booted peddler led four limping, footsore mules into Scornubel. He trudged down the wide, dung-strewn streets to a certain stables where he paid grudging coins to have his beasts penned, fed, and watered. He paid rather more to have his saddlebags lock-stored, and trudged out again into the gathering dusk, rubbing at a paltry mustache that sat like a hairy caterpillar upon his unlovely upper lip. He gave "Tarthan" as his name, and he walked as one who knew the Caravan City but wasn't particularly glad to find himself therein.

His eye seemed to fall only upon Scornubel's newer establishments, but always, it seemed, to soon find them lacking. At the threshold of The Rolling Wheel he peered into

the din of scrawny dancers and wearily roaring men, sniffed, and turned into the darkness again. At the shoulder-rubbing-crowded outer room of the Black Bowl gambling club he spat onto the purple carpet and went out as wearily as he'd come in, giving the bouncer who moved threateningly forward a grin of savage promise and the flourished point of a needle-thin blade three feet long.

The Bowl of Serpents seemed more to Tarthan's liking. He sat for some time tossing copper coins at the serpent-tailed dancers who undulated into view amid its many mauve tapestries, and polished off an entire decanter of emerald green Starlartarn wine from the Tashalar. The peddler was weaving slightly, but still steady of purpose, when he stopped outside Cata's Pump a little later, sniffed the air appreciatively, and told the world, "Ahh, a good broth. Worth the little walk from Waterdeep."

That comment made the eyes of the doorswords widen above their half masks as the dusty peddler stepped between them and sought the dimness within. Half a dozen merchants and burly porters were lounging drowsily in chairs around the edges of the tavern's lone taproom, the large empty bowls in front of them attesting to the reason for their collective torpor. A single tankard stood neatly before each diner; no one had spilled anything, or was calling for more yet. In fact, no one was saying anything. Tarthan cast a narrowed eye over the tomblike taproom, found a smallish table hard by a pillar, and sat.

A serving wench drifted up to stand over him. "Your pleasure, goodman?" she asked tonelessly, staring over Tarthan's head at something mildly captivating that seemed to be occurring several days' ride to the east, through the dirty taproom wall.

"A fist of cheese, a bowl of that broth I smell, and a roundloaf," the peddler said heartily, holding up a closed fist full of coins.

Instead of flicking her fingers in the shorthand gestures that would give him the price demanded for his meal, the girl simply nodded and turned away. Tarthan nodded too, slumping wearily into his chair, and gave the room a wide-mouthed yawn. A curtain moved back into place across a doorway at the far end of the room, but the peddler gave no sign that he'd seen it—or cared very much about curtains or spying anywhere in Faerun.

Nonetheless, when the serving wench returned with a tray and a face of unchanged blankness, the peddler's seat was empty. There was no sign of him anywhere in the taproom. The girl stood for a moment in silent indecision, then set the tray down in front of the empty seat and glided away again. There was a thin layer of dust on the tray and the tankard, but no one seemed to notice.

"A quiet night," the peddler observed, leaning on his elbow. He was the only patron of The Moonshot Tankard, it seemed, but the bar master was diligently polishing boards that already gleamed glassy smooth under the lamplight.

"Indeed, sir," came the quiet, distant reply, as the bar master turned away to wipe a row of shining, unused glasses behind the bar.

Tarthan sipped soured beer from his tankard, keeping his face carefully expressionless despite the taste, and asked casually, "Any news?"

"News, sir?"

"What's befalling in the Caravan City these days? Any new talk of the drow coming up from the depths to kill us all in our beds?"

The bar master's shoulders stiffened for the space of a long breath ere he turned and said quietly, "Not that I've heard, sir. Some bad storms this past month . . . fewer caravans running into town. That's about it, sir."

"Ah, well, then, I'd best get to my bed," the peddler replied, draining his tankard with a loud sigh and setting it

carefully back down on the bar. "Good ale," he said, rising to go.

"Finest in the city, sir," the bar master murmured, turning to watch Tarthan lurch toward the door. His eyes never left the peddler's dusty back until the dwindling, dusty figure turned a corner at the end of the street. Then he turned with the speed of a striking snake, thrust his head back through the curtains that led into the kitchen, and hissed something soft and quick to someone unseen.

It came to pass that four furtive figures met under the cool, clear starlight of Scornubel that night. One had darted out of the Moonshot Tankard not long after its last guest of the night, another had patiently followed a man who'd left Cata's Pump earlier in the evening without a single taste of the meal he'd ordered, and two more had but recently stepped out of other establishments where a dusty peddler had asked for fresh news of the drow.

The four hadn't planned to meet. They converged separately on the same alley in the wake of a dusty man who now stumbled a little, and whistled a few tuneless notes from time to time. When they came together, four pairs of eyes flickered, one hand lifted in an intricate gesture, and four figures moved on as one. If all deals were so simple, swift, and quiet, Faerun might be a more efficient place. Then again, it might well also be a more deadly one.

The alley ended in a cluster of burned out, roofless warehouses, homes for rats and occasional beggars—though beggars didn't seem to linger long in the Caravan City these days. The four silent, graceful men gathered speed, heading for the doorway the peddler had disappeared through. They knew it led into a fire-blackened stone foundation and cellar beneath, now lacking upper floors or a roof. If a certain peddler couldn't climb walls right smartly, they'd have him—a sheep backed into one corner of a shearing pen.

The foremost blank-faced man was still two swift strides from that gaping doorway when someone stepped out of it—

someone small, slender, and obsidian skinned, who moved with catlike grace on spike heeled boots. Four hands had already dipped to the hilts of throwing knives and slender long swords . . . and all of them froze now in astonishment as the drow who'd stepped out of the doorway drew her dark cloak up around her, gave them all a knowing smile, and slipped down the alley like a graceful shadow.

Four heads turned to watch her go, and four throats were longingly cleared in unison before the foremost man drew his sword and his knife and stepped through the doorway.

He was gone only a short time. When he returned his face was still blank and his weapons were clean and dry, but his gliding movements now showed unease rather than anticipation.

"Did she kill him?" one of the others asked.

The man who'd just come out of the burned ruin replied, "There's no sign of him. It's empty." They exchanged puzzled glances, then turned as one to look back down the empty alley.

Seemingly sleepy folk stiffened all over the taproom of Cata's Pump as a black-cloaked figure strolled in from the street straight up to the bar, and gave the room at large a cold smile.

The she-drow let her cloak fall away from her bare shoulders, and lamplight flashed back from the cluster of gems she wore at her throat; wealth that marked her as no outcast or lone runaway. Tracing a symbol idly on the bar with one sharp-nailed fingertip, she asked the bartender and the two serving wenches flanking him, "Any of you in the mood for a little trading? Homesick for any Underdark wines or fresh glowcap mushrooms?"

Folk blinked all over the room and leaned forward. "Ah, I don't—" the bartender began, his eyes dark pits of confusion.

The she-drow facing him raised an eyebrow and purred, "Well then, do you know someone who does? There's demand below for Calishite—or Tashlutan—silk, pitted dates, and metalwork: gates, bars, gratings, filigree . . . and I've wine and 'shrooms to trade, but not much time to waste." She shifted perfect obsidian shoulders and murmured, "Are you *sure* you don't? By the looks of things, everyone here could use some real wine."

No one smiled or looked angered; folk with blank faces drifted a little nearer as the bartender stammered, "S-sarltan. Speak to Sarltan."

"And where might I find ... ?" the she-drow murmured, watching furtive movements in the tightening crowd that marked the journeys of hands to weapons. She shrugged back her cloak still more, and from the glistening black garment she wore beneath it, four slender black-bladed knives rose slowly up into the air. There was a momentary murmur that might have been alarm, or might have been recognition, and patrons began to drift back to their seats to resume looking as sleepy as before. The knives hung in the air around the she-drow's shoulders, points menacing the floor, as the bartender pointed wordlessly out the door.

"You keep this Sarltan out in the street . . ." the she-drow asked, eyebrows raised, in a voice that did not—quite—hold open sarcasm. ". . . or as one of your doorswords?"

The bartender shook his head, then spread his hands in a wordless gesture of helplessness before waving again at the street.

His visitor shook her head, smiled, and said, "Well, think on my offer. I'll be back later to see if anyone has developed a taste for the finer things of home."

There was already astonishment in the stares of the doorswords as the she-drow in the cloak whom they'd watched striding openly down the street glided up to them and asked, "I suppose neither of you knows the present whereabouts of Sarltan?"



The guards stiffened as if they'd been kicked in tender places, exchanged baffled glances, then silently backed away from their questioner, waving gloved hands in gestures of denial. The she-drow shrugged, smiled, and strode between them into the cluttered and dusty labyrinth of Chasper's Trading Tower.

Chasper's never closed, no matter what the hour or weather. Its lobby was crowded with the usual badly-mended array of life-sized wooden shop figurines, and the obsidian-skinned visitor passed through them without delay to push wide the inner doors and step into the warm lamplight beyond.

She was greeted by the same sight that had met the eyes of a decade of patrons: a welter of nets, ropes, boats, cartwheels, coach-harnesses, mended lances and armor hanging from the rafters, and heaps of well-used boots, belts, gloves, and scabbards on tables before her. Beyond these mountains of gear, aisles snaked away through piles of animal cages, battered traveling strong chests, and moldering books to sagging tables that stretched away into a warren of shelving whose far reaches were lost in dimness. From their crannies two startled men were hastening forward to serve this unexpected client.

"Yes, good lady?" one of them asked hesitantly, rubbing nervous hands together. "How may we serve you this fair night?"

"We can offer you the widest selection of goods in all Scornubel," the other put in brightly, "and at excellent prices."

The she-drow in the black cloak eyed him. "I come not to buy," she purred, "but to trade. Have you any interest in exchanging bolts of woven silk—Calishite, if you have such—pitted dates, and metalwork for wines and mushrooms from below?"

The shop attendants reared back from her as if she'd thrust a viper into their faces. One of them dropped a hand

to the knife at his belt, and the other stammered, "W-we don't usually barter here at Chasper's, good lady—and certainly not in bulk. Perhaps you should meet with Sarltan."

"Ah, yes," the lady drow agreed with the faintest of smiles. "That's a name I've heard before. Yet no one in all Scornubel tonight seems to know where Sarltan can be found. You wouldn't have him under one of these tables, would you? Or in another room, perhaps?"

The doorswords appeared behind her then, having taken the unprecedented step of leaving their posts. The she-drow had her back to them, and gave no indication that she knew of their approach, but as they approached her, four long black knives rose in unison from among her garments. The knives came to a halt, hanging in a cluster in the air above her. The two guards eyed them, frozen with their hands gripping the hilts of their swords, and came no closer to the unexpected visitor. One of them reached up to a bellpull on the wall and tugged it in a careful rhythm. No resulting bell or chime could be heard.

The eyes of the older and larger of the shop attendants flicked to the doorsword's work with the bellpull, then came quickly back to the faintly smiling drow in front of him.

He tried a smile of his own, licked his lips, and said, "Ah, *no*, good lady. I don't think there's a shop in all the city that could help you there, but if you'd care to step into the back our owner might be able to help you . . . ah, in regards to what you seek."

He motioned down one of the corridors as reverently as if he'd been conducting a queen or priestess of power, and the lady drow in the cloak flashed him a dazzling smile and glided forward whence he'd indicated, her knives keeping station above her shoulders.

The back room proved to contain a once grand carpet, paneled walls almost completely hidden behind stacked and dusty rows of bulging ledgers, and a sharp-eyed, wrinkled old woman behind a desk who gave her visitor a sharp look

as the lady drow entered, and said crisply, "Close the door and sit down, dear."

In smooth silence the lady drow did as she was bid, taking the only chair in the room that wasn't heaped with bundles of papers. It offered her behind a fresh, dust free cushion that hissed and settled under her weight as she sat upon it. If she noticed the wisps of greenish gas that curled up out of it to drift around her, she gave no sign of this.

The old woman behind the desk sat in frozen silence for the space of a long breath, as if waiting for something, and at length her visitor leaned forward and said pleasantly, "Greetings this night, and prosperity upon this house of commerce. I've come to Scornubel to do a little trade, but find folk here curiously reluctant to do business with me. I represent interests from below who have a strong assortment of wines to offer, and many barrels of fresh glowcap mushrooms, which they desire to exchange for Calishite silks, pitted dates, and metal gates, bars, gratings, and filigree of superior quality. Whenever I speak of this to anyone in this city, they seem ill at ease, and direct me to 'Sarltan.' Your helpful young men out front believe you can help me. Can you, or is this a notion we should both disabuse them of?"

The old woman's fingers moved in a few quick, crawling patterns above the parchments on her desk; her visitor responded with a gesture of her own.

The old woman sighed, then, and sat back. "I don't deal with the nameless," she said quietly. "Give."

"Ilylinvyx," the lady drow replied, "of House Nrel'tabra. I'm also called"—she gestured at the knives hanging above her shoulders—" 'Pretty Teeth.' "

"And in what city does House Nrel'tabra flourish?" the old woman asked, her eyes two black flames.

"Telnarquel," Ilylinvyx replied, gracefully crossing two black-booted legs and lounging back in her chair.

"Ah, yes, the Hidden City—sought by many, and found by none. Many of our wisest explorers refuse to believe that it even exists."

" 'Our'?" the she-drow asked softly.

The old woman gave her a smile bereft of warmth and humor, and said, "All of us in this city obey Sarltan. Among other things, he strictly forbids us to reveal our true natures. I advise you to at least put up your cowl on your way to see him. I know not if he'll apply his dictates to outside traders. So far as I am aware, you are the first such to come here."

" 'On my way to see him'?" Ilylinvyx echoed, reaching for her cowl.

The old woman nodded, her smile now a trifle more approving, and said, "Ask my doorswords to direct you to a private club called Blackmanacles, and there seek a man known as Daeraude. Tell him Yamaerthe sent you before you ask him how to find Sarltan—and keep your cowl up and those knives of yours out of sight. You might say those from below are cautious in Scornubel, and embrace cautious ways."

Ilylinvyx Nrel'tabra nodded and let her cloak fall away to her elbows to let the four daggers slide down into waiting scabbards. She did not try to hide the dazzle of gems at her throat as she replied softly, "I had begun to notice that—and had also begun to wonder how far a people can stray from their true natures before they become that which they disdain."

The old woman stiffened behind her desk. She let out a hiss from between clenched teeth before she replied, "A pleasant night outside, is it not? I wish you every success in the conduct of your business in our fair city."

And with those words, the owner of Chasper's Trading Tower rose and let herself out through another door at the back of the room as fast as any charging warrior, but with considerably more grace than most.

Her visitor heard a heavy bolt clack into place an instant after the door closed, and acquired a thoughtful half smile as she gathered her cloak about herself and left the room, her cowl up.

Ilylinvyx Nrel'tabra was unsurprised to discover that she'd acquired a stealthy escort that increased in number by one pair of soft-booted feet for every person she was sent to after Daeraude: a corner lantern and candle seller, a lock storage keeper, and a master of "discretion guaranteed" hireswords, thus far.

"Well," she told the night air lightly, "at least I'm getting to see the glories of Scornubel."

According to her latest directions, the cobbled lane she was now traversing was Delsart's Drive, named for a long-ago wagon maker whose habit, when in his cups, was to race his latest creations along the winding lane at breakneck speed—with the inevitable consequences. Delsart's descendants owned the coach yard ahead on her right, and somewhere in the darkness to her left was Pelmuth's Draw, a narrow alley that would take her to a little lamp-lit courtyard, where among the businesses and their loitering doorswords she'd find a certain blue door . . . and somewhere beyond it (she didn't doubt complications awaited) was the elusive Sarltan.

The Draw, the lamp-lit court beyond, and the bored guardsmen were all as they'd been described to her. If her escort disliked her pauses in the alley to cast two spells, that was just too bad.

A mountain of a man was leaning against the blue door as she approached. He lowered the dagger he was using to clean his nails and rumbled, "Closed. Try elsewhere."

"I've been sent," the dark figure before him replied calmly, from within its cowl, "and would fain pass within—unless you can tell me another way to find Sarltan."

"Uh," the gigantic guard replied, in tones devoid of emotion, and extended one hand as he drew steel—a

fearsome, much-scarred cleaver whose blade was thrice as broad as most swords—with the other. "I'll have yer sword—hilt first, mind."

"And if not?"

The guard shrugged. "Turn about and leave, or die. No exceptions."

The figure before him slowly opened its cloak and let it fall away. A shapely female drow stood before him, jewels glittering at her throat. Below their fire she wore a tight black leather tunic that left her shoulders bare, and thigh-high spike heeled boots.

"Not even for the likes of me?" she asked softly.

There was a stirring around the courtyard as guards at other doors shifted their positions to get a better look at this newcomer. The guard hefted his weapon as he let his eyes travel slowly from the crown of her head to her toes, then back again.

"I'll be having the sword and all of those daggers I see," he rumbled flatly. "Toss yer cloak down, and lay all yer steel in it—and I mean *all* yer steel. Now."

Their eyes met—black flames flaring into two chips of stone—and held in a long silence that was broken only by the softest of sounds from behind Iylinvyx Nrel'tabra. The various folk who'd been following her drifted out of the Draw and into the courtyard, one by one, and the doorswords turned alertly to face them. Silence had fallen again before the slender dark elf slowly cast down her cloak, laid her needle-slim short sword atop it, then followed it with a pair of daggers from her belt, another pair from her boot tops, and one from each wrist.

She paused then, buckling sheath straps, and the mountainous guard gestured with his drawn blade at the sheaths sewn into her tunic. "Them, too," he said. "*Especially* them—all four of them."

He'd never moved to see the two knives that rode below her shoulder blades, so tongues must have traveled across

Scornubel faster than the route she'd been sent on. After holding his eyes for another long, cold time, the drow trader plucked out the black bladed quartet of daggers and casually let them fall onto the heap of edged steel. They landed without making a sound.

"Turn around," the guard rumbled, "and stand still." After Iylinvyx had—slowly—complied, he added, "Bend over forward and cast yer hair down. I need to see the back of yer neck."

The drow trader complied. As she stood bent over in the lamplight, her magesight awake, she felt the quiver she'd been expecting. Someone had cast a dispel upon her, stripping away the shielding spell she'd thoughtfully added. Most mages would now be defenseless, but her Shield of Azuth—a spell of her own creation—had nullified the dispel with its own death—leaving her aroused protective spells untouched beneath it. She straightened up after two long breaths and turned to face the guard with a challenge in her eyes.

"See enough of my behind?" she asked lightly.

The guard said nothing, and kept his face impassive and his eyes hard and cold. He wordlessly threw back a bolt in the top of the doorframe, too high for Iylinvyx or most humans to reach, and swung the door wide to let her pass within.

The drow trader strolled past him as if he wasn't there, and did not break stride when she heard the door close solidly behind her and the bolt slide back into place. She was in a lightless passage between two high rows of crates in a dank, lofty-ceilinged warehouse. The passage came to a dead end entirely walled in with stacked crates.

Iylinvyx Nrel'tabra looked calmly around, before asking the empty air, "And now, Sarltan?"

A voice that held a dry chuckle answered from somewhere atop the crates above her, "Not quite yet. That

large crate to your right with the dragon's head label has a front that can be swung open."

Ilyinvyx let silence fall, but her unseen informant did not seem inclined to be more talkative, so she did as she was asked. The crate proved to have no back. She looked through the little room it shaped, into an open, dark area beyond. On the floor of the crate was a snake. It hissed at her as she stepped unhesitatingly over it and out into what lay beyond: the back of the warehouse, in which two hard-eyed men stood, drawn swords in their hands. Their arms and shoulders bulged with the corded muscles built by hefting crates, kegs, and heavy coffers for years. They stepped forward in practiced unison as she emerged from the crate, so that she came to an abrupt halt with one sword point at her throat and the other almost touching her breast.

The drow trader looked coolly along each blade in turn. The one with his steel at her throat snarled, "Who sent you?"

"I think," Ilyinvyx Nrel'tabra replied calmly, "you already know that. I also think that the fresh mushrooms I want to trade will have withered to dust before I even get to speak to Sarltan, if you delay me much longer. I did not come to Scornubel for a tour, or to play passwords-and-daggers-in-the-dark games. Conduct me to Sarltan, or let me return below—to dispense full descriptions of your *attentive* hospitality."

Her voice had remained soft and mild, but the two guards stiffened as if she'd snarled her words. They exchanged swift glances, and the one with his steel to the trader's breast jerked his head back over his shoulder in a clear signal.

In unison again, they stepped back from Ilyinvyx, and waved with their swords at another door.

She nodded pleasant thanks and farewell to them, walked across dark and echoing emptiness, and opened the door wide.



Light flooded out. She was looking into a huge chamber built onto the warehouse, and well lit by a dozen hanging braziers. A balcony ran around its walls, supported by stout pillars to which were tacked many shipping orders. Burly loaders were striding about the room gathering small coffers and bundles into large travel crates and strong chests battered from much use.

In the center of this bustle stood a desk. A semicircle of armed men gathered behind it raised their heads to stare at her, but the fat and unlovely man seated at the desk kept his attention on the documents he was signing and tossing aside, or handing to a clerk with murmured comments.

Ilyinvyx did not tarry at the door for another confrontation, but strode calmly across the room, shifting her hips smoothly to avoid hurrying loaders—several of whom stiffened, stared at her, then hastily dropped their gazes and resumed their work—until she came up to the desk. She ignored the stares of the armsmen (beyond noticing that several gave her gems more attention than her body) as she bent over the desk, planting both palms firmly atop the parchment the fat man was reading.

"Might you be Sarltan?" she asked pleasantly. "At last?"

Without looking up, the man replied heavily, "I might be—and I might also be the man who'll have your hands off at the wrists in a breath or two if you don't get them off my papers right now."

Ilyinvyx Nrel'tabra left her hands right where they were. "Perhaps you can tell me when this Sarltan ascended the throne of Scornubel—and when, for that matter, our people conquered this city from the humans who still think they rule it."

The fat man raised his eyes to meet hers for the first time. "I am Sarltan. Who are you?"

"Ilyinvyx, of House Nrel'tabra," she replied, "of the city of Telnarquel."

"And the head of your house is?"

"Anonymous by choice," the trader replied coolly.

Sarltan's eyes flickered and he asked, "What house rules in Telnarquel?"

"House Imbaraede."

"And when you kneel at altars, Iylinvyx Nrel'tabra, whom do you kneel to?"

"No one," the trader said quietly, "until a divine hand convinces me otherwise."

The next question came as swiftly as the others, but the fat man's voice was now like a cold, sharp knife. "What is your true shape, trader?"

The she-drow straightened up from the table and gestured down at herself. "What you see," she replied calmly.

A look of disgust momentarily twisted Sarltan's features, and he lifted one pudgy hand and almost lazily crooked his fingers in a signal. From somewhere in the busy room came the snap of a fired crossbow.

The trader with the gems at her throat never moved. Her easy smile remained unchanged even when the speeding war-quarrel struck something unseen just behind her left ear, shivered into dark splinters, and ricocheted away to clatter down some crates nearby.

"Velrult! Imber!" Sarltan snapped, his fingers moving in a sign.

Two of the armsmen charged around the desk, their blades sweeping up. The curvaceous trader smiled at them, tossing her head so as to look both warriors in the eye, in turn, ere they struck—but they never paused in their rushes, and plunged their blades low into Iylinvyx's belly, ripping savagely upward.

Their swords passed through the she-drow as if she was empty air, leaving her leather-clad curves unmarked. The force they'd put behind their attacks sent them staggering backward, helplessly off-balance.

lylinvyx crossed her arms, scratched idly at one ear, and asked, "And what of you, fat man? What is your proper name—and what house do you serve?"

Sarltan was gaping at her, face paling, and he snapped, "Ressril!"

Another of the figures standing behind him obediently lifted his hands to shape a spell while the she-drow trader promptly took one of the staggering warriors by one elbow and his belt. She plucked him off his feet as if he were a child's rag doll and not a burly man two heads taller than her, and flung him bodily into Ressril who had time for one sharp cry before the back of his head cracked against the floorboards. The warrior's tumbling body bounced hard atop him.

"Sarltan," the drow trader purred as she leaned across the desk, "I asked you two questions. Don't keep me waiting."

One of her hands snaked to the back of her neck and came back with something unseen—something that stabbed down through the fat man's writing hand, pinning it to the desk as he shouted in startled pain.

lylinvyx Nrel'tabra slapped Sarltan hard across the face, whipping his head around, then sprang over the desk to catch hold of his free, flailing hand. With iron strength she forced it down to the desk, wrenched her dagger free—then brought the blade smartly down again, transfixing both of Sarltan's crossed hands and driving her hitherto-invisible dagger into the desk to its quillons. Its magic made the blade flicker, flirting with invisibility, as the fat man screamed and his blood splattered wildly across the welter of papers.

"Just sit tight," lylinvyx said jovially, patting Sarltan's shoulder. "I'm going to be rather busy for the next little while."

She shoved hard against him—evoking a fresh, raw scream of agony—to propel herself away from a glowing

spear that someone was trying to thrust through her. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the fat man's bulk change, but could spare no time to watch him turn back into his true shape . . . and after all, she knew what that shape would be.

Angry men with drawn weapons were converging on her from all sides. Iylinvyx dodged around one, tripped another, and kicked out at the crotch of a third so viciously her leg boosted him over her shoulder into a face first encounter with the desk. Sarltan shrieked again and she won herself the room she needed to race forward. The she-drow landed with both knees together on the throat of the sprawled Ressler.

Bones cracked under Iylinvyx as she looked wildly around. She had to find and take down any other mages here as swiftly as she could, both to avoid spell duels she couldn't afford to fight with so many foes seeking her life, and to free any of these loaders who might be humans in spell-thrall and not drow wearing human guises.

Thralled humans or drow, the thirty-odd loaders all seemed both enraged at her, and to have found weapons. Her ironguard spell wouldn't last forever. That glowing spear could pierce the magical defense the spell provided and hurt her as much as any other enchanted weapons. She couldn't be sure how many in the small armory now thrusting and hacking at her from all sides carried such blades.

Large, sweaty bodies smashed into her and sent her reeling. Fists came at her in a rain that soon had her ducking through the limp legs of the tall, handsome—and currently senseless—drow Sarltan had turned out to be. She ducked into the knee space of the desk. There she snatched the few moments she needed to snatch out the one magical ring she'd brought with her from its pocket in her bodice, draw it onto her finger, and let fly with her first burst of magic missiles.

Blue bolts streaked into faces that swiftly withdrew and Iylinvyx rolled hastily back out from under the desk in the

wake of her spell. Clawing her way around Sarltan, she used him as a shield against whoever might be leaping down on her from atop the desk—and there was just such a bright and enthusiastic fellow. The drow trader ducked away from the sword in his left hand as he crashed into her. She let him tumble headlong into some of her other foes, jabbing ineffectually at her with a dagger in his right hand that just wouldn't reach. She was skidding helplessly along the rough floorboards at the time, so this was a good thing.

Some of the loaders still hadn't realized metal blades simply passed harmlessly through her. Their brutal but ineffectual thrusts allowed her to roll past them, or to barrel hard into their ankles and trip them. She emerged on the far side of one toppling giant of a man, wincing at the crash he made bouncing on his face on the floor, and found herself with room to scramble up and run.

More men or drow-men were appearing in the doorway she'd come in by, shouting enthusiastically. Over to her left was a stair up to the balcony—a height currently echoing with the clatter of men cranking the windlasses of their crossbows like mad-wits, their quarrels meant for her.

Ilylinvyx Nrel'tabra sprinted toward the stair, skidding in her spike heeled boots as she ducked under an axe—for who could tell when one might be magical, in all this chaos of unleashed Art?—then spun around to avoid someone trying to tackle her.

Someone else then drove a sword through a friend while trying to reach her. Amid the groans she ran at and over a lone, scared loader who stood uncertainly at the bottom of the stair. Heads bobbed up here and there along the balcony, seeking the darting she-drow below, and Ilylinvyx drove her dagger into the throats of two men before any of the crossbowmen even realized she was up on the balcony.

The third fell with a volley of missiles from the ring surging into his face, and the fourth flung down his

unloaded bow and tried to drag out his sword. The drow trader put her head down and crashed into him, sending him sprawling back into the Bowman behind him. They fell together and Ilylinvyx pounced on them, driving her dagger down twice. That left just one man on the balcony. He took one look at the diminutive drow smiling at him as she rose from the bodies of two men whose blood was dripping from her arm right up to the elbow, and vaulted over the balcony railing, shouting in fear.

Ilylinvyx wasted no time in gloating, but spun around and scooped up two bows that were cocked tight but not yet loaded. As she felt around her feet for the spilled quarrels, she peered narrowly at the loaders below as they gathered both weapons and courage, and streamed toward the balcony stair. Were any hanging back, lifting their hands to cast—?

Ah, yes. *There*.

The drow mage masquerading as a man didn't see her quarrel coming until it was almost upon him. By then he had time only to choke, gurgle, and be carried along by it as it slammed into his throat and carried him over a heap of small coffer. His feet kicked once, then went limp.

The drow trader peered around the room below once more as she plucked up the second bow, but saw no other mages. She turned and put a quarrel into the face of the foremost man charging at her along the balcony. He spun around and the second man stumbled over him. She sent a stream of missiles from her ring into the face of the third as she launched herself at the stumbling man and smashed the pommel of her dagger into his face. He fell over with a groan, and Ilylinvyx drove her blade into his neck twice as she crouched, facing the rest of the charge.

It was proceeding with decidedly less enthusiasm now. The individual drow were either accustomed to danger or not, but they had all seen one small, unarmored female slay almost half of them in a bewilderingly short time. The same

foe now stood unhurt and unabashed, giving them a grin full of the promise of death as she strolled calmly forward along the bloodstained balcony to meet them.

More than one warrior in the ranks packed along the balcony had a sudden desire to be somewhere—anywhere—else. There was a momentary, jostling confusion during which Iylinvyx calmly picked up the last cocked crossbow, loaded it, and put its quarrel through one eye of the largest man on the balcony. There were mutters of fear and alarm, and more turmoil.

When a stinging volley of missiles from the drow trader's ring struck at the faces of several men, there was a sudden, shouting move to retreat. Blows were struck, with fists and bared blades, there among the drow of Scornubel.

Bruised and winded, Helbondel crouched back against the wall as the first shouting cowards thundered back down the steps past him. Black rage threatened to choke him even more than the blood welling up from where a hard elbow had driven him to bite his own cheek. He threw back his head and called on Vhaeraun for aid. The vicious madness that too often seized a priestess of the Spider Queen—and she *must* be a follower of Lolth, else why would Sarltan have challenged her so?—now threatened to destroy another triumph of the People, the greatest grip on the riches of the Sunlit World yet achieved by the Faithful of Vhaeraun. It is as the wisest elder holy ones say: the poisonous touch of the Spider Queen despoils and ruins wherever it reaches.

She must be destroyed! he thought. Whatever foul battle magic she was using to overcome veteran warriors, letting her slay like a snake striking at will in a nest of baby rodents, must be brought low.

Helbondel clutched his most precious magic—an amulet touched by the God himself, twisted forever into fire-scarred ruin from its former bright magnificence—and called up a magic to shatter all magics. It wouldn't last long or reach far,

and it might mean his death, but if it pleased holy Vhaeraun. . . .

A drow warrior, dying with a sword through his pelvis, stumbled backward and fell heavily over the crouching priest. The blade projecting out of his buttocks was driven down into Helbondel's neck with all of the warrior's weight behind it, and the priest could hardly vomit forth the blood choking him for all of the shuddering and convulsing his body tried to accomplish. Writhing and thrashing against the stone wall, he died never seeing the human guises of loaders all over the warehouse melt away—or the accursed priestess dealing death to them change as well, into something else. . . .

The slender form of Iylinvyx Nrel'tabra boiled up like smoke, amid a grunt of constricted discomfort and a sudden loud tearing of well stitched seams. A tall, broad-shouldered human woman stood grimly on the balcony amid the ruins of split boots and a rent leather tunic, her silver hair stirring around her as if blown by its own wayward breeze.

She looked down at the tattered scraps of her clothing and kicked off the painfully pinching remnants of her boots. The last handful of drow warriors on the balcony stared at her, open-mouthed—then fled.

Dove Falconhand, free of her she-drow disguise, vaulted over the balcony rail to land in their path, snatched up the body of a fallen warrior, and swung it like a club. Her first blow missed, but her second smashed the foremost drow into insensibility. The impact didn't numb her fingertips quite enough to keep her from feeling the shock of breaking bones.

Another warrior lunged at her in desperate fury, but caught his blade in the corpse she was holding. He let it fall in his frantic haste to flee. Dove swept up a fallen sword and hurled it, hard, at the back of his head. He fell without a sound, leaving her facing just two drow. She gave them a



smile, and pointed at an open, empty crate nearby. "Want to live?" she asked. "Then get in."

They looked at her, then at the crate, then back at her. Dove nodded at the crate, and softly repeated the words she'd earlier said to Sarltan: "Don't keep me waiting."

They gave her fearful looks and scrambled into the crate in almost comical haste. Dove took two long strides through the sprawled dead, plucked up the lid of the crate, and tossed it down into place. A black sword blade promptly thrust up through it. She grinned, hefted a full—and very heavy—crate from a pile nearby, and hurled it onto the sword. There was a rending scream of wood, cries of fear, and the laden crate settled a foot or so down into the box that now sink onto them until someone cut the drow a way out through the buckled sides of their improvised prison.

Dove looked around at all the carnage and sighed. "I sometimes wish," she told the empty chamber bitterly, "that dark elves knew some other way to settle disputes than with swords. Drinking contests, say, or just tossing dice . . . anything to keep them from thinking through all sides of a dispute, and trying to come to a levelheaded agreement."

She turned, and added briskly, "Now to the unfinished task at hand. Sarltan?"

Silence was her reply.

"Sarltan?"

Dove sighed again and picked her way across the room ... only to come to a grim halt near the desk. Sarltan was still sprawled across it, his crossed hands pinned down by her dagger—but he was quite dead. His head had lolled back to stare at the ceiling, freed to do so by the gaping slash in his throat. Blood had flowed like a river down him to the floor, and flies were already gathering around its stickiness.

One of his fellow drow had cut Sarltan's throat during the fight and a sickening tingling in the lady ranger's fingertips told her that something else had been done to seal his eternal silence.

Dove peered at the sprawled, no-longer-handsome body without approaching more closely. It wasn't long before she saw the hilt of a knife protruding from Sarltan's thigh. She waved her arm nearer to it, and felt a coldness in the air. Her lips tightened. No wonder her hitherto-invisible dagger could be seen quite clearly now: someone had driven a dead-magic-bladed knife through Sarltan to forestall any magic used to try to learn things from his corpse.

Sarltan was never going to tell her anything about the invasion of Scornubel from below. There were drow in the city who knew or had guessed why she was here, and wanted to keep the cloak of secrecy around their deeds. Sarltan's murderer had probably fled during the fray, so there was no point in trying to fool other drow into thinking this battle was an internal feud that should goad them into seeking revenge on their fellow drow for kin fallen here.

In fact, it was probably a safe prediction that the Underdark city of Telnarquel, abandoned by the drow decades ago, would be visited by certain dark elf avengers in the months to come. She hoped the alhoon who'd recently taken up abode there would give the drow war parties a suitably warm reception.

All the drow she'd seen here in their own forms were male . . . what did that mean?

Dove threw up her hands. She didn't know enough about the dark elves to even guess.

Well, a drow deception might be impossible, but the Rolling Wheel had been full of humans—true humans. Dressed as she currently was and playing the role of tearful escaped captive desiring a rescue for friends in drow clutches, she could easily lure a crowd of angry armed men here in time to see thirty-odd dead drow before anyone could clean it all up. A little widespread merchants' wariness in the Caravan City would slow ambitious drow plans for a season or two.

Someone should dispose of the magic-dead knife, but it would have to be someone else—say, one of the men she'd try to lure here. With the gods alone knowing how many drow still lurked in human guises in Scornubel, and a small but undoubtedly growing number of them planning to strike back at the trader who'd slain so many of their fellows, she needed to get far away from that magic-dead dagger—and fast.

Dove turned and padded barefoot back toward the blue door where she hoped a certain hulking guard was still on duty, all unwitting of what was about to befall him.

On the first threshold she looked back at the dead drow sprawled all over the warehouse. It did not take quick wits to arrive at the judgment that Dove Falconhand of the Chosen had made a right mess of *this* little meddling. It was time to call in an expert on dark elves. "Ah, Mirt," she told the darkness with a sad sigh, as she reached for the handle on the inside of the blue door, "you were wrong. Perhaps I need to retire with Blaskar to Neverwinter. I wasn't half so clever a bitch as I needed to be, this time."

## Qilue

### Dark Dancer, Bright Dance

*It was in the years after the Time of Troubles when Those Who Harp first truly became aware that one of the dark elf ladies who danced betimes under the moon perilously close to fair Waterdeep was the long-hidden Seventh Sister. Certain individuals given to embracing less noble purposes learned this too; some of them haven't recovered even yet.*

Abranthar "Twoquills" Foraeren  
from *I Harp As I See It*

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"Holy Lady, hear us," the drow priestess whispered, embracing the Ladystone. As her silken-smooth, jet-black flesh ground against its rough flanks, the enchantments upon it carried her soft voice clearly to the ears of every dancer in the glade. "We dance this night in thy honor, to dedicate Ardeep to thee!"

The sacred needle of rock flashed forth a sudden bright blue radiance, as if touched by moonlight. In a silent display that brought gasps of awe from the dark elf dancers, will-o'-wisps of magic rose blue and white from the fern-girt ground. They hung spinning softly amid the trees of Ardeep forest, all around the glade where the dark elves danced.

A human watching them—had anyone dared to venture into Ardeep when such weird glows were leaping and winking through its dark trees—would have seen a ring of short, slim, yet curvaceous women, so graceful that they seemed almost to float above the dew-drenched grass. The priestess embracing the standing stone at the center of the ring was the tallest among them. All of the drow were unclad, their obsidian black skin glistening with sweat in the moonlight. All of them had swirling, unbound white hair, large and dark eyes, and the pointed ears that cried "elf!" to

any human. They danced in fearless exultation, looking like bold and dangerous black flames moving under the watching moon,

"Oh, sisters," Qilue Veladorn cried, spreading her arms in exultation. "Eilistraee hears us, and approves! Eilistraee—*is with us!*"

She pointed up into the sky, the sweat on her bare limbs glistening in the light of the breast-high stone she embraced, and burst into tears of joy. The eyes of the other she-drow in the glade followed her pointing hand to see shadowy radiance building in the dark, overcast sky. Scatters of starlight were shaping the arms and shoulders of a graceful, gigantic figure. Its face was turned from them, its arms raised like those of their high priestess.

Slender, starry arms reached to the clouds, and spectral fingers plucked at the unbroken celestial ceiling of racing grayness. With a deep rumbling that shook the forest and the back teeth of the faithful of Eilistraee, throwing the few who hadn't yet knelt to their knees, the goddess pulled apart the clouds. She laid bare a wide eye of clear and starry sky and let down moonlight to set the old forest of Ardeep alight.

The drow priestesses sobbed as one, awe and joy almost overwhelming them. Qilue ground herself against the Ladystone as if riding a lover, tearing her flesh against it so as to shed her blood in thanks. It took more and more frenzied effort to do this as the years passed and the surface of the Ladystone wore smooth under the devotions of the faithful, but at that moment Qilue would not have cared if one of the cruel priests of Vhaeraun with his whip of sword blades had assailed her until his arm hung too tired to strike once more. Eilistraee had come to them, torn asunder the shroud of the heavens for them, and her favor still shone on them, even though the starry form of the goddess herself had now faded. Qilue covered the Ladystone with kisses and wept like a child.

From the stone, down the ribbons of blood that laced her legs, blue lightning of divine power snarled forth to play about the glade like joyous fireflies. The high priestess arched over backward, then let herself fall, but never touched the ground.

As the lightning shocked the ring of priestesses into song, then into senselessness, plucking them up to float and drift above the trampled ferns of the glade like so many wisps of moonlit cloud, Qilue floated on her back above them all, arms and legs spread like a star. The glory of the goddess coursed through her like living moonlight, and even in distant Waterdeep, men on the walls murmured at the beautiful light in the forest and pointed, and called their comrades up to see.

It seemed that she had been somewhere wonderful for a very long time, and was sad to leave it. Qilue wept as if her heart would break. She slowly became aware that she was lying on her back in the center of a glade that should have been cold, with the stars glittering in the clear night sky above her, but somehow wasn't. Little motes of frost like trapped stars glistened amid the ferns touching her, yet the spring night was too warm for frost.

The high priestess of Eilistraee rose on unsteady feet, stared down at the snowy outline of her body in wonder, and in a sort of daze realized that the blood was gone from her legs. The raw scrapes that the Ladystone had dealt her were gone as if they'd never been. She fought back fresh tears, and looked up through the glimmering they made to see all her priestesses standing in their ring watching her, delight and anticipation on their faces.

She shook her head at them, barely able to speak, and managed to gasp, "Ah, sisters—*dance!*"

As if her words had cried a battle charge, the faithful threw themselves into the air, obsidian limbs shaping beauty. Qilue cried out in new wonder. Through the glory of the goddess, the priestesses were dancing on air, their feet

no longer touching the ground. Leaps and pirouettes ended in descents of slow grace, not the usual swift, hard landings. As their chant climbed into song, their voices were at once magnified and yet kept soft, echoing away under the glowing trees of lost and fallen Ardeep.

Her heart full—could one person *know* this much joy, and yet live?—Qilue Veladorn looked up at the winking stars and sobbed her thanks to the goddess for this one night of mystery added to all her other kindnesses. Then she threw herself up into the air and into the dance, never noticing the small motes of light that trailed her lithe limbs.

A slow, faint music seemed to awaken around them. Qilue first became aware of it when she found herself shaping her movements to a rhythm that was not her own, yet seemed so right. She forced herself away from exulting in the dance, and being only aware of the dance, to look around with alertness and alarm in case this awakened power was a threat. Hers was the responsibility, as well as the glory; she was the guardian of the faithful, as well as their leader, and though what she could feel seemed friendly, it was not of Eilistraee. For a moment it seemed as if Ardeep forest was turning slowly under her, spinning with the rising dance. Might they be calling up something, releasing some power long slumberous here? Qilue looked all around as her limbs carried her in wide circles in the air, and saw something beyond the familiar dark figures of the faithful. There were other dancers. Their forms were more shadowy than her sisters in faith, though they were bathed in the pulsing blue light under the trees, where their bodies should have been boldly lit and clearly seen . . .

If they'd had solid bodies.

Emotion caught at Qilue's throat as she spun and whirled under the stars, realizing that she was looking upon the ghosts of the elves of Ardeep, moonwraiths risen in this hollow to join in the dance of Eilistraee. These great ladies who'd perished here in younger days, had somehow been

called back this night to honor the dance of elven folk whose skins were black and hotly hated by living elves.

Qilue knew she was crying again, pouring out awe and sorrow and at the same time trying to hold to the thought that there might be peril. These spirits might be some sort of magic gathering itself to expel or destroy the drow who dared to dance where fairer elves had lived, laughed, and lain fallen beneath the damp, dark soil. Qilue watched, holding herself apart from the rapture enough to bear witness to anything that might befall here before dawn brought them down exhausted to earth, and any blundering human forester with a knife could have his pick of sprawled obsidian bodies—or slay them all with a score of ruthless thrusts.

Her sisters in faith had seen the dancing spirits now and were calling to each other, even weaving among the moonshades, peering to see ghostly faces the better and match gaits and grace with the fallen. Qilue let herself rise higher above the center of the glade, up to where arching branches reached in toward her, the better to see it all.

It seemed wondrous, a crowning grace on this night of mystery, and yet. . . and yet . . .

"Oh, Lady Mystra, curse me not with your misgivings, your suspicions," she told the night air as she danced. "Let me be lost in holy Eilistraee this one night, unstained!"

She had one clear moment of nothing but dancing after that—before Reshresma screamed.

The song died in shattered notes, like a Sembian chandelier crashing onto a tiled floor. Amid its clangor the drow priestesses crashed to the earth, crumpled ferns making a crunching chorus. The light under the trees winked out, and the moonwraiths could be seen sinking slowly back down, like forlorn tongues of silver flame, into the darkness.

All but one of them: the one Reshresma had brushed against and found to be solid and real. The one her frantic



slash of true sight, augmented by the power of all the dancing drow, had revealed to be no elf lady at all, but a human woman.

A human woman Qilue knew, who now stood calmly amid a hissing, tightening ring of furious drow, her bare skin curves of ivory among their darkness. Long silver hair played about the shoulders of the intruder, as if with a life of its own. She stood gravely watching the sharp nails of the drow women close in on her. Those nails would tear away her very life, if Qilue did nothing. A little coldness deep within her wanted to do nothing but watch the slaughter.

The high priestess of Eilistraee ducked her head down and drew in a deep, shuddering breath. "Forgive me my weakness, goddesses both," she whispered hoarsely, then called on the power of the Ladystone.

A bright bolt of force flowed out of her, shocking the faithful into turning to face her. Into the stillness she'd thus created, Qilue said softly, "For shame, sisters, to turn the glory we have felt here this night to anger and violence. I had thought we were followers of Eilistraee, not Vhaeraun the Sly Savage or Lolth the Tyrant Poisoner . . . nor had I hitherto detected any leanings in you toward Tempus the Butcher, or any of the other blood-drenched human gods. Now be still, and be ashamed, until we can uncover the truth of this intrusion. Has not the Holy Lady of the Dance shown us wonders in plenty this night? Who among us is wise enough to say, before we look and learn, that this is not another such, sent to us in divine purpose?"

Without a murmur her priestesses fell back. First one, then another went to her knees, leaving the human standing alone at the center of their ring.

Qilue strode forward to meet her and said, "Sister Dove, this coming was not well timed."

Dove Falconhand inclined her head gravely. "I blunder to you because I have blundered already, elsewhere, and need your aid." She looked around at the black, glaring

faces upturned to hers and added, "I cry apology to all here, and holy Eilistraee, too, if I have offended. I did not mean to mock holy observances."

"Did not mean to mock?" one of the faithful snarled. "And yet you came dancing among us?"

"I love to dance," Dove said simply, "and have few enough chances to do so."

There were murmurs—some of them of grudging approval, or at least understanding—at those words, then several voices rose at once in fresh anger, and Qilue snapped, "Be *still*, sisters! You rage at intrusion, then shout and snarl in the very glade where we worship? Thus, then, do you revere the Holy Lady?"

In the moment of stillness that followed, Dove said gently, "I would have peace between us. How may I achieve it?"

There were stirrings, and urgent faces turned to Qilue, but none quite dared gainsay the fresh command of the high priestess. It was left to her alone to say, "I will be able to give answer to that when I know why you've come. Seeking me, so much is obvious, but what aid of mine do you seek?"

Before Dove could reply, one of the kneeling priestesses spat, "Qilue! How can you even entertain a request from a human? It gives her control over you—a human hand upon the holy power bestowed by divine Eilistraee! How can you sin so?"

The air was very still, yet it sang in their ears, as every kneeling dark elf in the glade strained to hear the slightest sound their high priestess might make in reply.

Qilue turned her head, looked down sadly at the panting, almost sobbing priestess, and said, "Veltheera, did you learn *nothing* from that time a wizard of Waterdeep burst in on our dance? I am Eilistraee's, and yet I am also Mystra's, seventh of the Seven Sisters."

She took a pace forward, and seemed taller, and darker.

"And know this, all of you," she continued, "I take orders from none of the Seven, nor they from me. Dove has come to beg a favor of me—and you want to slay her for it. I ask again: is it our Holy Lady of the Dance you serve, or a darker, bloodier god?"

In the silence that followed her words, Qilue made a soft blue flame of moonlight rise from her palm, and over its flickering light said in quieter, almost casual tones, "So, Dove, what's befallen?"

Dove drew in a deep breath, looked around at the kneeling priestesses, and said, "I've come from the human city of Scornubel, five days' ride or so south and east of here. It is a place of caravans, always a little lawless . . . and now home to many, many drow. These dark elves are wearing human spell-guises, and acting at—practicing—being human. I need to know why, and what's become of the humans whose shapes they wear, and what their intentions are . . . and to do that properly, without a lot of bloodshed, I need a drow to do it."

"And what is that to *us*, human," another priestess spat, "if some surface city is taken over by our kind? Are not dark elves worthy of even a tiny corner of the sunlight? You dare to call on the holiest among us to come running at your behest, to snoop and spy? Tell me, human, by what twisted thoughts do you conclude that we might, just possibly, be deluded into aiding you?"

Dove leaned over to look her questioner full in the face, and said flatly, "Dark elves are masters of magic, and Mystra bids me nurture magic wherever I find it. Humans are the most populous and energetic users of magic . . . and even I cannot nurture the dead. I want to keep alive all the drow *and* all the humans I can by avoiding the wars, and drow-hunts, and fresh feuds and hatreds that will come of humans learning too late that one of their cities has been taken over by dark elves. The humans you rightfully distrust will rise to arms in their fear and hatred to obliterate Scornubel, all

drow they find, and anything else up and down the Sword Coast that they can call 'drow,' or 'friend of drow,' Lady priestess, I want to save your *children*. Help me a little."

Hands went to mouths here and there, and Qilue saw tears streaming down more than one face, but another of the faithful screamed, "Words. *Words!* Those are the deadliest weapons humans use against us, and all others. Clever words, to cloak the evils they work in fair seeming ... until it's too late, and another dwarven realm or elven grove or drow city lies in ruins, gone forever, and the shining-eyed humans swarm on to tear down the *next* obstacle to their absolute rule and mastery."

"Yes," someone else hissed fiercely.

Before Qilue could utter a sound, black lightning stabbed from slender obsidian fingers, wreathing the human woman in ravening magic—magic that clawed, and blazed, then fell away in futility.

"Please," Dove said gently, "don't start this. I—"

"You can *die*, human!" another priestess—Ierembree—shrieked as the spell she'd just worked brought her favorite dagger into her hand. She sprang up like a boiling bolt of darkness to drive her blade hilt-deep into the belly of this tall, beautiful, insolent human who so profaned holy ground that . . . that . . .

Thoughts failed her, and in mindless fury Ierembree drove her blade deep again and again, her knuckles slamming home against hard-muscled flesh each time, for all the world as if the human were made of air that her blade could not touch. She stared down at her clean blade in horror, and at the unmarked body of her foe, then gentle fingers closed around her wrist, blue-white in the moonlight.

"Eilistraee is not the only power in Toril to teach magic to mortals, you know," Dove said.

Ivory limbs enfolded the drow priestess Ierembree in an embrace, a seemingly tender cradling that held firm despite kicks and bites—bites that did draw blood, more than one

faithful noticed eagerly—and raking fingernails. A roar arose amid the faithful, and obsidian bodies lunged to their feet, reaching—

"Stay *back*, sisters," Qilue cried, "or face the full fury of Eilistraee!"

Dark elf limbs froze in mid-surge as their owners stared at the nimbus of bright white fire that now encircled Qilue's upraised hands. There was more than one whimper as the drow settled back onto their knees.

In their midst, Ierembree's ebony-black limbs struggled on against Dove's unmoving ivory ones. The watching faithful were startled to hear soft human cooing, as a mother might use to soothe a child, and to see human hands stroking the flesh trembling in their grasp. Dove kissed the top of her attacker's head, then lifted the dark elf priestess gently into the air until their faces were level, and kissed the snarling lips before hers.

The raging priestess shrieked, spat into Dove's face, then tried to bite her lips and nose, but Dove's gentle smile never changed. When her panting captive grew weary, she bent her head forward until their foreheads touched.

Ierembree tried to twist her face away from the contact, her features still contorted in hatred and fury. She stiffened, and her eyes opened wide in amazement.

Amid the kneeling faithful, someone whispered, "Sorcery!"

They saw the priestess turn to look at the human so close to her with no fury left in her face. Ierembree managed a tentative, tremulous smile, then she relaxed in Dove's arms, and they hugged each other as if they were long-lost friends.

The human set the dark elf down and stroked her shoulder with one last gentle caress. The priestess seemed to be struggling to say something, but could find no words.

Dove drew away from her, murmuring, "I must go now—but I'll return, Ierembree, and we'll talk more. Much more."

She turned and swept Qilue into a similar embrace, heedless of the white fire of deadly magic raging in her sister's hands and splashing down around her.

"Sister," the faithful heard the human say, "Go to Scornubel if you can, walking your own road. I must leave that city. My usefulness there is at an end. My very presence is making the surviving dark elves lie low."

Dove turned to the kneeling priestesses and said, "Farewell, all of you."

Before any of the bewildered faithful could frame a reply, the human strode a few paces into the glade and inclined her head to the Ladystone. Its response was a sudden pulse of blue radiance, a silent winking brighter than the sacred stone had shone in years. In awed silence the faithful watched the human walk away through the trees to where she'd shed her clothes. Dove took them up in a bundle, and walked on through the darkness of the wood until they could see her no more.

A moment later, as if freed from spell-thrall, the priestesses were all on their feet and talking at once, crowding around Ierembree.

"What did she do to you?" one of them demanded.

"Watch her," another said grimly. "If the human took over her wits."

Ierembree threw back her head and laughed. "Stop it, all of you!" She smiled at Qilue over their heads, and told them all, "Her name is Dove, and she did nothing to my wits except give me love . . . the love of a friend who'll stand by me." She shook her head in bemusement, and added, "More than that, she *showed* me she meant it... and what she truly is. Mind to mind; no lying."

She smiled, stretched like a contented cat, and added, "No, Sharala, I'm not crazed. I'm . . . happy."

Ierembree turned to the high priestess, who stood like a dark shadow watching them all, and said, "I was in awe of you before, Lady of the Dance. I—I don't know how to say

how much I revere you now ... a sister of such a lady as Dove ... and one whom Dove turns to for aid."

She started to kneel, but Qilue strode forward to snatch her upright again, whirled her into an embrace, and growled, "I'll kiss and cuddle just this once, mind. I'm not the caressing whirlwind certain of my sisters are!"

She turned in Ierembree's arms, and put out a hand to touch the priestess who'd railed against the clever words of humans.

"Llansha," she said formally, "the lead in the dance is yours. Raise your voice too much on the second chant and flames will burst from your arms; they go if you hurl fire at something. As you heard, I've work to do, and must leave you for a time."

"Leave us?" another of the faithful asked angrily. "To settle some human problem by slaying our kind?"

"Thalaera," Qilue replied in a voice of warning iron, as another tense silence fell around them. "I live to serve. Two goddesses birthed me and guide me. I see a little of how they view Faerun, where you cannot. Trust me in this as I trust you with a part of my service for a time, to go and do other service that is needful. If you doubt me, curl yourself around the Ladystone to sleep tonight, pray to Eilistraee for judgment upon me, and learn your answer."

Thalaera stared at the sacred stone then back at the high priestess, her eyes large with fear, and Qilue added gently, "Yes, do that. I mean this not as a challenge, but to set your mind at ease as to my loyalties. Learn the truth."

Thalaera looked back at the Ladystone again. Her eyes narrowed. "Will I be maimed?"

Qilue shook her head. "Hurt, perhaps; maimed, no."

"Hurt?"

"Truths have sharp edges. Learning the truth often hurts."

Qilue strode out of the glade, the other faithful following in her wake. She turned at the edge of the trees to

look back at the fearful Thalaera, and added, "I'll return after dawn, briefly, before I go south to Scornubel."

The priestess bowed her head in reply, and the faithful watched her turn and slowly approach the Ladystone, her steps reluctant and trembling.

In utter silence she reached forth one hand to touch it, and they saw her shudder and sag at the knees. Almost instinctively she clasped her arms around it, her eyes closed—and the Ladystone flashed out blue fire as it had done for Dove.

Thalaera's gasp was loud in the silence. Qilue stood watching her for a moment, then turned and said briskly, "To bed."

Dark limbs around her stirred into motion again, but several priestesses still stood staring into the glade, watching cold fire running along Thalaera's limbs in her trembling embrace of the stone.

"To bed, all of you," Qilue said sharply. "There's much to do tomorrow."

She looked up at the stars then, as the faithful began to move, and sighed. Only Ierembree, whose arms were still linked with hers, heard Qilue add in a whisper, "There's always much to do tomorrow."

The stumble spilled not a drop, but displeased Namra, who seemed to be in a foul mood this morning. What right had Isryl to be so cheerful, after the beating she'd been given last night?

"Clumsy wench!"

The merchant's wife lashed out at the servant girl with all the strength in her arm, swinging her walking stick like a buggy whip. Isryl jumped as metal-shod wood cracked across her shoulder blades. The glasses on her tray chimed against one another musically. It was little surprise that she stumbled again, but her lady master saw no reason not to strike out once more.



Beatings obviously did humans a world of good. They'd left Isryl groaning in the darkness, her bared back wet with blood and afire with crisscrossing welts . . . and found her this morning humming and striding along with a spring in her step, her eyes obediently downcast, but a little smile on her lips. Why, she was smiling *now!*

"Mock my authority, will you?" Namra snarled, lurching forward to land a fury of blows on the servant girl.

Isryl half turned in their midst so that glasses flew and decanters toppled. Her lady master drew breath for a shriek of rage at this carelessness—and that was when Isryl calmly flung the silver tray and all into Namra's face.

Blinded and half choked, Namra staggered back, spitting out stinging wine. Firm hands seized her chin and held it immobile with steely strength. A cool forehead touched hers and the world exploded as if all glasses, everywhere, had burst at once, their shards tumbling down into darkness.

As Namra's stout body went to the floor, the slender servant girl moved with it, keeping their brows together. This moment had been well chosen. No one else was in this end of the house just now, and the girl who was not Isryl needed only a minute or so for this grimmest of stealing spells.

When she lifted her head from the stocky body of her lady master, Isryl's slender form had already begun to change. She tugged off her gown and carry-sash in frantic haste, then set to work with strong and eager fingers to acquire the clothing of her lady master, rolling the senseless Namra over like so much meat on a kitchen board. The fat woman's form was melting, too, her skin growing dark and more shapely, her features delicate and elfin . . . but no change could strip away the tiny wisps of smoke drifting from her staring eyes, or the thin ribbon of drool flowing from one slack corner of her mouth.

Qilue was not gentle. The real Isryl had been more dead than alive this morning. It had taken three healing potions to

get her well enough to walk, and the Harper agent she'd been delivered to had still winced and clucked disapprovingly at the girl's battered appearance.

This cow under her hands had done that.. . this cow who'd now slumped fully back into her drow form. Qilue herself now looked like fat, lazy, embittered Namra Dunseltree, wife of Inder Dunseltree of Softer Tapestries fame. Qilue finished tying and adjusting Namra's over-jeweled, none-too-clean clothing around herself, satisfying herself in a mirror that she looked every bit as haughty and nasty as her predecessor in the role. She plucked up the walking stick to strike a pose, then danced back to the senseless, drooling drow. Qilue bound her hand and foot with the gown and carry-sash, then cast a careful spell.

The body vanished under her hands, and she knew it would now be lying in the midst of the glade in Ardeep, with Llansha, Veltheera—and Thalaera—staring disapprovingly down at the new arrival, wondering how many spells and how much gentling would be needed to make it sane once more.

Qilue sighed, shrugged, and stepped forward, every haughty inch Namra Dunseltree. Her mindtouch magic had earned her only the most superficial and uppermost of the disguised drow's thoughts. To learn more would have taken days of careful and continuous probing. If she'd tried for much more, much faster, her victim—and she knew that "victim" would then have been very much the right word—would have gone quickly and irrevocably insane, losing forever in mental chaos the very memories and knowledge Qilue sought.

What Qilue did know was that the cruel drow was Anlaervrith Mrantarr, a lazy novitiate into the worship of Lolth. She was a drow of humble birth and no particular accomplishments, who'd been quite happy to leave her subterranean city. Qilue had been unable to learn the name of that city, though she'd gained some mind pictures of it

made vivid by fear and hatred. Anlaervrith had left there for a chance at betterment and adventure. To that end she'd dealt with a drow sorceress—not a priestess, but able to pose at will as such—who called herself simply "Daerdatha."

Anlaervrith was to wear the shape Daerdatha put her into after the human Namra Dunseltree had been "removed," and to act, speak, and live as Namra had done, as communicated in mind messages Daerdatha had thrust—Qilue would almost have said "burned"—into Anlaervrith's brain.

Qilue's lips twisted in disgust, and she gave the nearest bellpull an angry jerk. The lazy cow had jumped at vague promises of freedom from the rule of Lolth or decadent nobles. She was told tales of a vast and splendid new world where everyone who had half their wits about them could wallow in endless prosperity. These promises were made by someone deliberately mysterious, who wore a succession of spell-spun, false faces—someone Anlaervrith hadn't even knowingly seen since taking up her role as Namra. She suspected—idly, not really caring—that some of the merchants whom her husband showed around their house were disguised drow not merely playing their own roles, but somehow keeping an eye on her.

All Anlaervrith had really cared about was that Namra didn't have to work, or skimp on food, wine, and clothing, and that she had plenty of servants that she could mistreat to her heart's content. The stablemen even included a well-muscled few whom she planned to get to know intimately. Anlaervrith had been both fascinated and repelled by the crude size and stink of humans.

Qilue frowned. When Anlaervrith thought of pleasure, she thought of warm, hearty good meals—and plenty them—and of having so many gems she could bathe in them, slithering around nude in their cool, hard beauty. She also thought of flogging servants and reducing them to tears or to obvious fear, and—older memories, these—of watching

the bared, sweat-slick bodies of drow warriors as they limbered up for weapons practice. And, just lately, she thought of sugared pastries and biscuits, and of sweetened cream.

She did not think of Namra's cold and distant husband, whose face flickered with disgust at the very sight of her, or of the sadistic drow—whose name she didn't even know—now impersonating him. As for dreams of the future, Anlaervrith had none beyond endless indulgences. This drow, at least, was no threat to the kingdoms of the Sunlit World, so long as she always had a full belly and new gemstones poured into her lap often enough. She neither wondered nor cared about what plots might be driving those who offered her this chance to play at being human. In short, she was very far from the vicious, restlessly cruel schemers Qilue had met in her dealings with drow merchants, slavers, and mercenaries.

Well, so be it. 'Twould almost have been beyond belief to find a secret leader of this invasion inside the head of the very first drow she impersonated. While Qilue searched for someone who'd know more, she'd be Namra Dunseltree, or more accurately, play at being Anlaervrith playing the role of Namra. The real Namra had doubtless gone to slavery—or even some orc's cookfire—months ago. If Anlaervrith's obviously spotty memories were anything to go by, the servants hastening—reluctantly, but not daring to dawdle—to answer her summons would be arriving just about—

Qilue turned and drew herself up, pointing her walking stick imperiously down at the mess of shattered glasses and decanters, the spilled wine, and the tray, and snapped, "Well? Must I wait all *morning* for something to *drink*?"

The foremost of the two servants stared down at the chaos of the fallen tray in astonishment, and something very like delighted glee flashed across his face for just an instant before he swallowed, gulped, and said, "What beverage

would be my lady's most immediate pleasure?" Qilue waved a careless hand. "An array of wines, very like these. I'm quite unsettled. Do you know that the little bitch—Isryl, man, don't gawk at me as if you can't think who I'm speaking of! —*threw* them at me, and fled?"

The servant in the rear made a queer strangled sound that might almost have been a swallowed chuckle, then stiffened to attention as his lady master Namra leveled her stick at him and added, "*You* shall go and hunt her down. She is to be whipped until bone is laid bare, somewhere on her, then brought to me spread and bound to a tapestry frame, for my . . . *private* dealings with her. If you find her not, you shall serve in her place!"

The servant gulped, paled, and sprang away in frantic haste. "Lady—'tshall be so!" his call rang back to her, as he pounded away down a passage.

Qilue smiled grimly and said to the first servant, "Send others to clean this up, and to bring me three sharp kitchen knives and a bottle of cheap perfume. They are to be set on yonder table, for my later discussions with disobedient Isryl." Her smile broadened as she lurched forward to stroke the fearful servant under the chin with one end of her walking stick. He swallowed carefully as the metal cap caressed his throat. "I find," the merchant's wife purred casually, "that the sting of perfume, poured into open wounds, quite drives off the stink of fear."

She went on silently smiling into his eyes until she saw deepening terror there, and the trembling man felt that his lady master must be expecting—waiting for—a response.

"Y-yes, Lady Namra," he managed. "Shall I bring your wines now?"

"With a tallglass, yes," Qilue commanded, and tapped his throat with her stick. "And be aware: I shall not be pleased if it takes you long."

His eyes flickered before he nodded almost furiously and spun away. By some trick of air currents, Qilue could

clearly hear sounds occurring down the passage—and she could have sworn, amid the sounds of his dashing feet, that she heard him reply under his breath, "A shortcoming that afflicts many, you old battle-axe . . . may all the gods rot you."

She gave the nearest mirror a smile and brought the end of her walking stick down hard into her own palm, hearing the smack of flesh before the sting began. It was a little like one of the slavers' goads she'd felt, years back. Qilue felt old angers stirring in her, and her usual unease at being away from the faithful of Eilistraee. Walking in the dirt, cold stone, and noisy crowding of a human city she also realized, with real surprise, that she was enjoying herself, unknown dangers and all. She'd been out of harness for too long.

Welcome back, Mystra, she said in the silent depths of her mind, and I do mean welcome.

She hadn't expected a reply, and none came, but as she set the walking stick down on the table, one of its metal ends flashed with a momentary blue radiance, as if it were winking at her.

*"Obedient wife,"* Master Merchant Inder Dunseltree told the tabletop, in a voice that dripped with cold sarcasm, "we are expected this even at the house of the glover Halonder Eldeglut, and his wife Iyrevven, for revelry until dawn. Shall our usual agreement apply?"

Namra dug her ring-adorned fingers greedily into a glistening mauve mound of hammerscale roe. From under her brows she shot the hovering server a "get hence" look that sent the servant scuttling for a distant doorway.

"Suppose, dearest Inder," she said to the fish eggs in front of her, "you reacquaint me with our 'usual agreement.'"

She thrust her fingers into her mouth and gave herself over to murmured appreciation of the flavorful roe.

Her "husband" looked as if exasperation would master him for a moment, then fell back from the brink of a furious outburst to say in silken tones of menace, "You ignore any dealings I may have with . . . ladies, remaining your usual pleasant self, and I shall do the same for you as regards both handy male flesh and, ah ... your excesses at board and bottle."

Namra lifted her eyes to his and said with a gentleness that surprised Inder, "I still find this agreement acceptable, and I must confess to feeling a quickening interest within me, this day, for the man who now sits across from me."

She watched him rear back in astonishment, then saw his face slide from that into incredulous disgust. Qilue decided a seduction of the drow playing Inder would arouse more attention than was good for any hope of successfully learning more about those behind the drow invasion, and their plans.

She gave Inder a hard look to know that his reaction had been observed and found wanting, and asked the half-destroyed mound of roe in front of her, "Must I attend this revel at all?"

Inder lifted a dumbfounded eyebrow. "This is a *taking*, Namra. We are under orders to be there. The Eldegluts have widespread business interests, and much influence. Many of their guests are true humans, as yet unaware of us. You and I, among others, are assigned to conceal from them both the drugging and the assumption."

The drugging and the what? Qilue reached for her large and brim-full wineglass and asked, "This is expected to be an unusually clumsy assumption?"

Disgust washed again over Inder's florid face. "Just how little did Daerdatha train you?" he snarled, taking up his own wine. "Some humans can go on for half a night; others pitch on their faces the moment they take their first swallow, but it always takes hold suddenly when it does work. Human merchants poison each other so often they know in a trice

just what's happened to anyone falling over senseless in mid-quaff." Mockingly he saluted her with his own glass, and drank deeply.

Qilue echoed the gesture, and helped herself to more roe. She'd been feeling a bit stomach-sick of mornings, lately, but this—the fare or the company, she didn't know which—was making her feel less than well right now.

"And do we know just what's going to happen to these humans, after?"

Inder chuckled harshly and replied, "We're none of us supposed to know or talk about that, and yet every last one of us wants to know. I'm always surprised at how much we seem to care about the fates of hairy, stinking humans—but I admit, I'm curious too."

He dug a fork into a steaming marinated ground slug, took a bite, chewed appreciatively, then said around the morsel, "Dragged off to the barge with all the rest, Brelma said, bound for Chult, where they'll spend the rest of their short lives hacking roads through the jungles for rich Calishites who hope to find mines bursting with head-sized nuggets of solid gold, and a-drip with already cut and polished gemstones."

"Gems," his wife echoed dreamily, and Inder nodded at this unsurprising reaction.

"Oh, no doubt there're stones under the mountains of Chult, *somewhere*," Inder added dismissively, "but I'd die of long-passing years waiting for someone to find enough to get out past all the sharpwords who're waiting for just such outgoing cargoes . . . then somehow to pass within reach of my waiting hands. Besides, you can't eat gems, I'd much rather deal in magic, if one has to trade in intangibles—at least there's power there, not mere empty beauty."

"Akin to the empty beauty of a smiling human maiden at a revel, perhaps?" his wife asked thinly.

Inder scowled. "I've heard what *you* do to human female beauty when you get the chance. Just keep your stick



and your lash off our useful servants. If just one hanger or tapestry seamstress misses work because of you amusing yourself, I'll see to it you get a taste of what you give to others."

Namra curled her lip. "You? And just who will hold me down?"

"I'll call on Daerdatha," the drow playing at being her husband said bleakly, "then you'll harm no one. You might even find yourself in a household that we've entirely taken over—being the human maidservant who feels the lash whenever her master knows anger ... or lust."

"I think I know Daerdatha better than that," his wife hissed—but Inder thought her voice sounded more frightened than menacing, and merely smiled.

"Go and get ready," he said. "You'll probably need some time to find a gown you can still get into. You eat like one of those hogs these humans keep!"

His wife rose, and replied sweetly, "While you, Inder, are one of those hogs these humans keep."

Her husband went white to the lips, and his half full wineglass burst into shards in his tightening hand. Qilue put a hand to her mouth in mock fear, struck a terrified pose, then strode away trailing tinkling, derisive laughter.

Inder plucked up the roe she hadn't yet eaten, strode to a certain door, and slapped it across the face of the servant standing at it.

"Clear the meal," he snapped as he shouldered past.

"Yes, lord!" the servant said anxiously, and set about licking all of the roe he could off of his face, before either his crazed lord or lady master might return to countermand Inder's most recent order. Hammerscale roe cost its weight in gold, and he'd only tasted it twice in his life before.

Several swallows later, he made a face, wondering why anyone prized it so much.

"Halonder, you old lion!" roared a red-haired merchant whose shoulders were as wide as the door he was trying to

stagger through. "All this just to get our coins for another of your swindles? Wouldn't it just be easier to hire some dancing lasses to come and try to er, *win* the coins from me? It's always worked before!"

"Ho ho," agreed Halonder Eldeglut hollowly, trying not to notice the sharp look his wife was giving him. Qilue wondered why he seemed so chastened; it was nothing compared to the glare Iyrevven Eldeglut had given her at the door, upon seeing that the webwork of emeralds displayed down the slit front of Namra Dunseltree's newest party gown was far more numerous and dazzling than the pectoral of emeralds and diamonds Iyrevven herself wore.

"*Whoa*, Halonder! *Whoa*! Send the lasses back and just tell your wife to come round, hey?"

The loudly roaring merchant had obviously taken several flagons of something aboard before arriving—as a necessary precaution, no doubt. Qilue had to firmly erase a growing smile as she recalled the garrulous old Lord of Waterdeep, Mirt, telling her to get drunk "as a necessary precaution, unless yer already deaf and somehow armored against boredom" before attending some nobles' revels in the City of Splendors . . . hmmm, Mirt had taken quite a shine to her, come to think of it; he'd always insisted in seeing "my little dark lady with the eyes of pure fire" in her true form before she spun a spell disguise to go out into the streets.

Inder nudged her now, none too gently. Qilue knew what he was signaling, and stepped firmly forward to tow the loud merchant past a glowering Iyrevven Eldeglut and distract the man now, as preparation for distracting him in earnest later. Namra Dunseltree was fatter and had larger jowls than many of the men here in the Eldeglut mansion this night, but the open front of her gown allowed her—by dragging everything sideways—to lay bare one of the most formidable breasts in all of Scornubel. Namra had spent some time this evening gluing glittering emerald dust to its

thumb-sized nipple. Owing to a shortage, it seemed Namra had only ever stepped on one or two emeralds. The other one was adorned with ruby dust.

Qilue dragged her gown sideways, just as she'd practiced in the privacy of her mirror chamber. The merchant fastened his eyes on the sudden display, gasped, and transformed her towing into an enthusiastic charge that would have knocked her right over if there hadn't been a wall in the way. The emeralds at the throat of her gown momentarily struck her chin as her shoulders thundered into the wall, and the merchant crowed happily.

Iyrevven Eldeglut gave Namra a brittle smile over the merchant's growls and slobbering, and asked, "Happy now, dear?"

Namra blew her a kiss. "Happier than you'll ever be, Iyrevven," she replied sweetly, "if you don't get out and about more. I hear the scenery in Chult is quite spectacular this time of year."

Inder's elbow nearly broke one of her ribs. "That's neither amusing nor wise, shulteen," he snarled into her ear. He dragged her—and the still guffawing and nuzzling merchant—half a dozen paces away from a puzzled Iyrevven Eldeglut and into the din of sixty or so excitedly talking revelers. "We're not supposed to know or discuss such things, remember?"

His fingers dug into her shoulder like claws as he shook her, and Qilue hissed in pain despite herself as his fingers almost met through her upper arm. "Shulteen" was a scornful term used by some southern drow that meant, roughly, "stupid and reckless wanton, whose behavior leaves her not worthy of continued life." My, but Inder was upset.

"I don't even remember this gallant's name," she hissed, nodding her chin down at the merchant plastered to her front. "Who is he?"

"Malvaran Olnarr," Inder snapped, "deals in spices brought in from Amn. He's the eyes for someone, but we're

not sure who."

The red-haired merchant burst upright, and guffawed into Inder's startled face. "An' we'll just keep it that way, shall we? I don't like my business rivals to be too sure of things." He turned to leer at Namra, chuckled her under the chin, and said, "A pleasure meeting you, m'lady. Perhaps we could get better acquainted later, hmm? About the time all these scrawny sorts fall exhausted, hey? Folk with real meat on their bones—like you and me—we're the ones who know a thing or two about life!" With a final gale of laughter, he spun away from them both and reached out with both hands to pluck wine bottles off the tray of a startled passing servant.

Inder glared at Namra, then put his lips to her ear and hissed, "Just neglect to mention Chult again for the rest of the evening, hmm?"

Namra raised one eyebrow, and shifted her gown slowly and deliberately back and forth. "I distracted him, did I not?"

"Yes, thoroughly," Inder said shortly, his breath warm on her neck. "The gem dust is very effective. Do that again when I go to refill our hosts' goblets."

Namra turned to lick his chest as if in play, and murmured, "Soon, this?"

Standing stiffly immobile under her tongue, Inder growled, "As soon as I can get back to them and take the goblets without seeming forward or unusual."

"Count on me," Namra purred, stepping away from her false husband. Several self-important voices died away momentarily among the grandly talking merchants as their owners turned to watch the buxom, emerald adorned woman strut to a pillar of sweets.

On her way back from the pillar to take up a fresh tallglass of firewine from the sideboard, Namra Dunseltree seemed to develop an itch. When a few frowning, surreptitious clawings had no apparent effect, she practically tore open the front of her gown to get at her

breastbone, hiking the emeralds—and the gown they were attached to—this way and that. She didn't have to look up to know that her audience was steadily increasing, and her downcast eyes also let her see Inder's passing boot, on his way back to Halonder and Iyrevven Eldeglut with the drugged wine.

"Can I help, m'lady?" a dealer in southern silks purred at her shoulder. "I could not but help notice your obvious distress."

"Oh?" Namra purred. "Yes, 'dis dress' is a trifle obvious, isn't it?"

His sudden shout of laughter drew more eyes. Over his shoulder Namra saw Iyrevven throw back her head to drain her glass, as Inder put out his arm past her to usher her husband Halonder into a side chamber.

Iyrevven's eyes rolled up and she started shaking. Namra turned her head to join in the silk dealer's mirth, but shot another glance at her hostess in time to see Inder's arm snake out from the doorway. He took Iyrevven firmly by the elbow as her glass crashed to the floor, and turned her to follow Halonder.

Now came the moment she'd been waiting for. Namra clasped the delighted silk dealer to her bosom, rocked him as she giggled, and kept a steady watch on the door through which Inder and the two victims had disappeared. The folk who headed for that door now would have to be the two dark elves who'd replace the Eldegluts—and persons at least high enough in the invasion scheme to cast the spells of seizing. If one of them should happen to be Daerdatha, would Namra even recognize her?

And how well would Daerdatha recognize Namra—or the dark elf wearing Namra's skin?

Six . . . no, eight dark elves were converging on the door, laughing and talking, but strolling with rather more alacrity than they should have been. Seven strode in. The eighth—a dark-eyed man whose rich shirt was open all down

the front to display not only a hairy chest, but a dozen thick, coin-adorned gold chains crisscrossing it—spun on his heel to face the wider revelry he'd just left. He darted glances all around the room, looking for folk who might be watching.

Qilue got her eyes down in time, spun away from the silk dealer with a last saucy laugh and the flouncing comment, "M'lord, I'd tarry, but atter your simply *must* go find my husband."

The silk dealer took that as a compliment, and was still laughing and waving when Namra Dunseltree turned to enter a certain doorway—and found her way blocked by a dozen thick ropes of gold and the hairy chest behind them. She gave its owner a merry smile and said, "My husband, Inder—he went this way, I know he did."

The dark-eyed man simply shook his head, saying nothing.

Namra tried to push past him and he shifted sideways, pinning her against the doorframe. One of Inder's tapestries had been hung in the room beyond, blocking everyone's view of its depths from the door.

"Good sir," Namra said insistently, struggling against the strength that held her pinned, "I *must* go to my husband. Make way!"

"Forget not your orders," he muttered into her ear. "Now turn around, act merry, and go seek out a drink. Your 'husband' will appear at your side soon enough."

Namra drew back, and he let her go. She paused, a dozen steps from the doorway, and turned to look challengingly back at him. The dark-eyed man's eyes widened as if she'd done something impossible, then narrowed . . . then seemed to blaze up into flame.

Something in Qilue's head seemed to stir, then grow warm, and she found the images of the real Namra coming to mind, one after another in a quickening, almost urgent flood: the memories Daerdatha had placed into Anlaervrith's mind. The heat of hostile, roiling magic was rising swiftly

now in Qilue's head, and the images were repeating, in an ever quickening, bewildering stream. The dark-eyed man seemed to be trying to awaken something he could not find, to force her to do something. Were all the disguised drow in Scornubel controlled like puppets?

Well, one at least was not, and now one of those who sought to exercise such control knew it. Qilue turned hastily away, seeking a doorway that would take her out of this throng of revelers. If every one of them could be turned against her, bloodshed—*lots* of bloodshed—would be inevitable.

Halonder and Iyrevven Eldeglut were doomed to a brutally short slavery of backbreaking work in the hot, dangerous jungles of Chult, but if Qilue defied the many disguised drow here in open battle, scores of folk—both dark elves and unwitting humans—could well be doomed. Yet if she did nothing, doom might be reserved for Qilue Veladorn alone. . . .

"Hold, Namra!" the dark-eyed man snarled, his voice harsh and loud. Heads turned to look, all over the room, and Qilue saw other heads appear behind the man's shoulder. Crowded together in the doorway, their eyes were cold and alert. One of them whispered something Qilue couldn't catch. Men and women in the laughing, chattering height of revelry drew hitherto-concealed knives from under sleeves, out of bodices, and from the side slits of gowns, and plunged them calmly into the throats of those they'd been standing joking with.

"Sweet Mystra," Qilue murmured, hastening toward a window. So these invaders valued human lives as nothing. The gurgling dying behind her must have all been humans of Scornubel, and their slayers the disguised drow who'd slipped in to take the places of their neighbors, and vanish among them. So open a butchery meant that the leaders of the invasion considered the city already theirs—or cared nothing for the drow who'd become Scornubrians.

The window ahead was an increasingly attractive destination. The doors might all be too distant and too well guarded, but she wasn't so old yet that she couldn't manage a little tumbling.

Behind Qilue, a cold, cruel voice snapped an order in words she did not understand, and there came a thunder of movement as a hundred or more feet began to move in haste, converging on her in what seemed almost a charge.

A dozen or more grim-faced humans—spell-disguised dark elves, no doubt—stood between her and the window. They were moving to block her, ranging themselves carefully to allow her no way past, and to give each other room to fight. Every one of them had a knife of some sort, and at least two held full-sized swords ready in their hands. Dark eyes glittered with hatred . . . the eyes of her own kind. Qilue swallowed.

Murmuring words she'd hoped not to have to use, she spun around with a dancer's grace and hurled a spell at the onrushing drow. The stars of Eilistraee were quickly spread everywhere in the room, and an unseen, inexorable force that only worshipers of the Dark Dancer could withstand was hurling her pursuers back, some of them stumbling awkwardly amid the furniture and onto the bodies of those pressed too closely behind them.

Qilue wasted no time in gloating, but spun around again and hissed the words of her next spell at the drow between her and the window. Two of them were almost upon her, stabbing, and it took all of her skill at bobbing and weaving to finish her spell and send forth lightning among them.

Blue-white bolts leaped almost hungrily from her fingertips, and the bodies they darted amongst convulsed and screamed, arching and dancing helplessly in the crackling air. Here and there between Qilue and the window, humans flickered into their darker true shapes as they convulsed and screamed under the raking pain of her



leaping bolts, and the daggers in their hands burst into tiny falling stars of molten metal.

Qilue ruthlessly kicked sobbing forms out of the way and sprang toward freedom. She was still half a dozen sprinting paces from her goal when a gray mist occurred before her—and almost immediately hardened into a smooth, blank wall of unyielding stone.

Qilue fetched up hard against it, shoulder first and rolling away to one side to lessen the blow. In the process she looked back to the room behind her where someone had dispelled her repulsion spell. Fifty or more drow were hastening forward again, their blazing eyes all bent on her.

Real fear rose deep in Qilue's throat for the first time in a long, long while. She hated having to strike down fellow dark elves, and yet expected no such mercy from them . . . and there were so gods-be-cursed *many* of them.

She hissed the words of a spell that should have melted away the stone, and anything solid beyond, into a tunnel for her to flee down, but nothing happened. The power to feel magic that Mystra had bestowed upon her was dulled. The very air seemed dark and dead, as if no spell could reach here, or thrive if this air reached it. She was in some sort of anti-magic field, no doubt the creation of one of the leaders of the drow invasion—either the dark-eyed man or one of the coldly scornful women who'd stood behind him. As groans around her told of the pain-wracked struggles of those who'd felt her lightning, the other drow were racing down upon her. She had just seconds to call on the most powerful magic she could, to banish the magic-quelling effect.

The air seemed to brighten and momentarily glow the faintest tinge of blue. Qilue danced away from a man who was lunging at her with a slender short sword in the style of a noble fencing his way through a duel. She opened her mouth to melt the stone between her and the window with one of her last powerful spells, and the magic-quelling returned with a vengeance, its dimness rolling down over

her with renewed vigor. Someone else had cast a second anti-magic spell, and robbed Qilue of the last few vital seconds she needed.

Cruel knives slid coldly into her biceps and upper thighs, then firm hands were upon her. Unfamiliar arms wrapped themselves around her burning, suddenly enfeebled limbs, pinioning her as she gasped and kicked and bit. They dragged Qilue to the floor, where ungentle knees came down on her throat, and bodies sat hard on her laboring lungs. A small army of strong, grim drow clung to her. They held her down with her limbs spread in unyielding fleshy prisons, and cuffed her spell-hissing mouth until blood threatened to choke her, and her arching body could call up spells no more.

"Quztyr," commanded a voice that Qilue's stolen memories identified as Daerdatha, "find out just who our fierce little guest is, will you? She's yours, by the way, after we're done."

"My pleasure," the dark-eyed man replied. The memories Qilue had seized from Anlaervrith Mrantarr identified Quztyr as a dangerously capable warrior, but she couldn't even see him through the many bodies holding her down and clapping their fingers over her eyes. Someone forced her jaws open by jabbing cruel fingers into their hinges, and someone else thrust the point of a dagger into her mouth, advancing it coldly along her tongue until it just touched the back of her throat.

From above her head, a hard brow descended to meet hers, and the same mindtouch magic she'd used on Anlaervrith flooded into Qilue's mind. Unfortunately for Quztyr, he wasn't facing a terrified, battered drow spy or human enspelled into drow shape, but an angry, alarmed dark elf archpriestess of Eilistraee who also happened to be a Chosen of Mystra, the powerful goddess of magic.

His own sentience boiled away in a flaring instant of futile terror, and his convulsing body fell away onto the floor

beside the pinioned Chosen in a welter of thumps and a long, tremulous gasp. Wisps of smoke curled from his nose, sightlessly staring eyes, and mouth. Qilue heard the drow all around her gasp. Several of the painfully tight hands gripping her started to tremble. She had the time, now, to launch one magic of utter destruction. It would reduce her to blinded helplessness for hours, perhaps days, rend this mansion and everyone in it, and bring her no closer to learning more about the invaders of Scornubel. Despite the part of her that wanted to bring a screaming end to all of this, restoring her to freedom, Qilue lay still under the hands that held her, and awaited more pain.

"Nuelvar," Daerdatha's cold voice came again, "slay that mindless carrion for me." After a little silence, the voice sharpened as it added, "You heard me. I'm not accustomed to repeating my commands, warrior."

There followed a brief, wet sound, a gurgling, then the slump of a heavy body onto the floor.

"That's better," Daerdatha said silkily. "So passes the overly ambitious, exceedingly arrogant Quztyr from the scene—belatedly, some would say. Approach, now, and press the palm of one of your hands down on a spire of the crown on my head. Blood must be drawn."

"And—?" Nuelvar asked hesitantly.

"Your mind will be linked to mine—as, shortly, will that of Brelma here, and Durstra, Syldar, Ghalad-dyth, and Chaladoana. Oh, and Chaladoana's three apprentices—gather them, dear."

Nuelvar grunted, a short sound that was almost a bark of pain, and Daerdatha added, "Well done, warrior. Together, once the crown links us all, we can withstand the strongest spell this little spy can possibly have waiting inside her head, and overwhelm her to learn what we must of who sent her here, and how much they know—or have guessed—of what we've done in Scornubel. She must be kept alive, for our own safety... witless, but alive." The cold chuckle that

came from Daerdatha's throat gave Qilue her first shiver in years.

It seemed a very short time thereafter that another brow pressed against Qilue's, and a cold and numbing worm seemed to probe into her thoughts, sinking inexorably through the mind thrusts she sent at it—the attacks that had shattered Quztyr's mind. Though the pinioned priestess of Eilistraee could do nothing to stop this cold, heavy invasion of her psyche, she could hear gasps and growls of amazed pain from close by. She gathered that several of the drow linked to the crown were discovering real mind pain for their first, unpleasant time.

Daerdatha gave a louder gasp, and followed it with the words, "Heed, all of you! We must be very careful. Brelma, draw that dagger out of her mouth—carefully—and thrust Quztyr's glove, there, into it. Pinch her nostrils shut if she tries to say anything at all." Her voice rose, obviously pitched to the drow throughout the room, as she added, "There is great danger! Get back, all of you—into other rooms. There could be a ... a blast of magic."

Qilue could hear hastily shifting feet in the distance as a gag was roughly thrust into her mouth, and her head slapped hard in the process. She managed to bite the fingers of the person who did that before other hands locked her head into immobility. Someone tore away Namra Dunseltree's jeweled and tasseled mauve boots from her feet, someone tore away her emeralds, and someone else near at hand murmured, "What sort of spell blast?"

"None," Daerdatha said flatly, her voice far quieter than before. "I said that just to get ears that don't need to hear more about our spy, here, far enough away. This is not Anlaervrith Mrantarr—whose fate I can only guess at—but Qilue Veladorn, Chosen of the Chosen of the Promenade of Eilistraee, who also happens to be one of the Seven Sisters, the Chosen of Mystra ... and, of course, one of our kind."

"Move your fingers out of the way," Nuelvar said grimly. "Chosen of Mystra or not, she'll be little harm to us dead—a simple thrust of my blade into one eye then the other should do it."

"No!" Daerdatha snapped. "The decree was clear. No more dark elf blood shall be spilled in this city."

"What? We let her *live*?"

"Her death might bring forth magics that slay *us*," the drow sorceress replied icily. "Break her wrists to stop her casting spells, bind her, and throw her in the river. Nothing was said against drowning ... or fish bites."

Qilue twisted under the hands that held her, arching and rolling and struggling furiously to spit out her gag and hiss the words she needed to say to awaken several ready spells. She bit viciously at the hands that tried to muzzle her, but could do nothing to stop cords being tied tightly around her wrists, elbows, knees, and ankles. She felt herself being plucked up into the air, carried a little way, and dumped onto a table. Her arms were stretched over her head so that her hands were beyond a table edge, while heavy bodies sat on them. As if from a distance she felt sharp, rending pain in her wrists and heard splintering, dull cracking sounds as she lost all feeling in her fingers. Cruel hands struck her head, slamming it back and forth until her ears rang and her senses swam.

"Enough amusing yourselves. Bring her," Daerdatha purred, clear triumph in her voice. "Khlemmer's dock has anchor weights for his nets. We'll need four or five to make sure she goes to the bottom and stays there."

"*Hurrmph*—she's heavy enough," Nuelvar complained, as brisk drow footfalls sent pain shooting up Qilue's arms. "Anything else we should do to her?"

"Not what you and Quztyr were thinking of," Daerdatha said calmly, "unless you want to die screaming while she takes over your body for her own. Just tie the weights to her throat, waist, knees, and elbows, gag and blindfold her so

Mystra's curse can't strike at us when she dies, and give her to the river."

With surprisingly deft haste, these things were done, the drow lifting the bound and mute body over their heads to hurl her far out into the cold and muddy waters of the Chionthar. The splash she made almost drowned out their collective gasp of relief, but none of them quite dared to turn their backs on the river for a long time. Only a handful of bubbles came up, and didn't persist for long.

Nuelvar Faeroenel wasn't the only one to turn away from the dock with a surprising sense of loss, but he was the only one to sigh aloud. This earned him a sharp look of suspicion from Daerdatha.

Three paces later she did something that made only two of the others so much as hesitate or look up at her. She blew Nuelvar's head to bloody spatters with a spell, just to ensure the safety of the drow of Scornubel. To say nothing of the safety of one Daerdatha "Dark-spells."

The Chionthar runs slow, cold, and foul past the mud-choked pilings and wharves of the Caravan City. If she'd still needed to breathe, its muddy bottom would have been Qilue's grave. As it was, she gave herself over to waiting in the numbing cold until all of her slayers would have turned away. She knew well the impatience that ruled most dark elves. That impatience had once governed her as well—before she'd truly come to know and embrace Mystra. She gave the goddess wry thanks, now, for this highlight of her career, and concentrated on ensuring that one of the spells she'd awakened in her last struggle was working properly.

Yes, *there*: the faintest, most blurred of touches told her she was linked to Brelma, through the bites she'd landed a time or two. Right now the lady drow was striding rather grimly through the disarray of the grandest room in the Eldeglut mansion, looking rather urgently for the glass of wine she'd been in the middle of when all the trouble with

the spy had started. Good; that was a link Qilue would follow in the days to come.

It was probably time to call on one of her other active spells, and end her drifting in mud that was rather too rich in dead, rotting fish—and hungry, very much alive lampreys with a taste for recently delivered bodies—for her liking. Being dead, Qilue judged, was decidedly undignified, chilly, and boring.

It was the practice of the barge merchant Welter Thauburn to shift his most valuable cargoes a little way downstream, and across the Chionthar, early in the dark hours of a night. It was a little thing, but it baffled a surprising number of thieves into spending fruitless, cursing hours groping blindly up and down the wrong riverbank. Welter kept an eye and ear out for such nuisances as crossbow bolts and strong swimmers at such times, but he was entirely unprepared for the sudden eruption from the waters not an arm's reach away from where he sat against the rail of his best barge, of a bound and blindfolded woman.

She burst up into the air, hung almost above him for one terrifying moment, dripping as she blotted out the stars, then flew rapidly and silently away to the northwest. Welter stared after the apparition, hastily drained his hip flask of Old Raw Comfort, then hurled the flask into the river, vowing to forever give up strong drink.

Well, perhaps after he'd drunk dry the keg waiting for him in his cellar. . . .

"Simylra," Cathlona Tabbartan asked archly, shifting her peacock feather fan to better display the dusting of diamonds in her upswept hair, "tell me, pray, *who* is that vision of manliness below? In the silver and green scales?"

Her companion leaned forward over the balcony rail in a gesture designed to display her diamond-dusted, fur-supported breastworks to all of reveling Waterdeep, and said, "That, I declare, must be Lord Emveolstone." She gave a little shriek of excitement—not the only one to rise just

then from an otherwise breathless female throat—and gasped, "Oh, but cousin Cat, look you now upon a dragon incarnate! Could it be that Danilo Thann?"

Cathlona bent forward over the rail in a near plunge that sent the spindle shaped, rose hued crystals of her pectoral dancing against her heavily rouged chin, and said, "I-I can't tell who it is. That dragon head entirely covers him ... he must be looking out of its jaws!"

The lord in question was wearing a splendid silver specimen of what by now was over two dozen ridiculous dragon suits that the two cousins from Amn had seen grandly entering the festivities at their first Waterdhavian nobles' revel. They couldn't even recall the name of the noble family hosting this costume ball, but it was certainly grand. Servants were plying all of the guests with decanters of drink and silver pyramids of sugar dusted pastries. Cathlona, for one, was already feeling rather sick. She righted herself hastily, looking a little green, gave her cousin a weak smile, and sat back to fan herself with rather more enthusiasm than grace.

"My word, Simmy, how're they going to dance in such arrays, do you think?"

"The costumes *do* come off," her cousin said testily, "and I'll thank you not to call me by that—that disgustingly silly nickname!"

"There are no silly names," a glorious voice drawled near at hand, "in the presence of such beauty."

The cousins turned as one to stare at the speaker—and emitted identical gasps of hungry awe. The object of their attention was a man whose fine features were adorned rather than ruined by a finely upswept mustache, its chestnut magnificence overwhelmed by the curly sweep of hair that must have reached to the man's waist, but was bound up in a scarlet ribbon to keep it clear of the spotless green shoulders of his elegant, festive jacket. He was lean and lithe beneath the devastatingly simple lines of his garb.



From the lace at his wrists to that at his throat, every curve of his form betrayed sleek strength and flaring, ready muscle. As for his gray silken breeches, with their discreet codpiece—why, the tight bottom they displayed to the world as he bowed and turned to leave them made both cousins gasp again, then swallow . . . then turn to each other to share an incredulously delighted squeal. As he glided swiftly away down carpeted steps, the man in the dark green jacket managed to sufficiently suppress his shudder that neither of the overly plump Amman ladies noticed.

"Who *is* that delectable man?" Simylra Lavartil inquired of the world at large, ruffling the furs that supported her bosom with an enthusiasm that threatened to shred them.

"That, madam," a servant murmured, as he bent to offer her a fresh drink of manycherries wine from a tray of full tallglasses, "is Dumathchess Ilchoas, as yet bereft of any noble title . . . though I believe the ladies have given him one. They've taken to calling him 'Dauntless.'"

Simylra thanked him profusely, and proved the fervor of her gratitude by seizing not one but three glasses from his tray. She drained them in rapid succession before hurling herself back in her chair to stare at her cousin with a gasp of mingled satiation, longing, and delight.

"Dauntless!" she cried. "Oh, can the world *hold* such pleasures?"

"Evidently, madam, not for long," the servant murmured disapprovingly, as he surveyed the wreckage of his tray, and glided away without giving Cathlona an opportunity to work similar havoc upon it.

She stared sourly after the dwindling form of the servant, and asked, "So just what did our Dauntless see, over that rail, to make him abandon us—nay, *spurn* us—in such unseemly haste?"

Simylra gathered her strength with a visible effort, and leaned forward again to gasp anew. "Why, it's the most daring costume yet!"

"Some lord's come naked?" Cathlona asked, raising her delicately plucked brows questioningly.

"No, cuz, not a lord, but a lady . . . and not *quite* naked. She's wearing some black leather straps—" Simylra giggled and colored prettily, waving a few fingers before her mouth—"here and there, you know. They must bear some powerful spells; her disguise is nearly perfect."

"Her disguise?" Cathlona asked, not quite daring to lean forward again after her previous experience.

"A drow princess," Simylra breathed, her eyes glittering with envy as she watched the new arrival sweep across the entry hall with catlike grace. Every male eye below turned toward her. The lady was daring indeed, to come as an outlawed, evil being, wearing little more than a pair of gleaming black buttock-high boots, with silver heel spikes, and elbow-length gloves of the same material. Her breasts and loins were covered by little more than crisscrossing leather straps hung with spindle-shaped rock crystal stones, and a black ribbon encircled her throat. Her hair reached to the backs of her knees in a magnificent, raven-dark sweep that was bound in a cage of silver chain ending in two delicate chains, little larger than glittering threads, that hung in loops attached to the spurs of her boots. Two tiny bells hung from pointed silver medallions glued to her nipples, and she wore a calm, crooked smile that broadened as the man known as Dauntless swept up to her and proffered his arm. As she turned to display herself to him, the two gaping cousins saw that a walnut-sized diamond bulged glitteringly from her navel, and that a tiny sculpted dagger hung point downward from the cluster of diamonds and silver scrollwork at her loins.

"Gods," Simylra murmured, swallowing noisily, "how can anyone compete with *that*?"

"Simmy," her cousin said grimly, "either get me a drink—a very *large* drink—or let me go home."

"May I say, my lady, what a splendid costume you chose to grace our eyes with, this night?" Dauntless offered gallantly, keeping his eyes carefully on hers.

Qilue laughed, low and musically. "You may indeed say so, Lord Dauntless. I find your own appearance very pleasing to the eyes."

Dauntless chuckled. "As I've said, good lady, I'm hardly a lord, but I am, I must confess, a man smitten. I would know your name."

In reply he got a light laugh and the murmured comment, as the devastatingly lovely lady leaned into his grasp, "I'd much rather remain a woman of mystery this night, if you don't mind."

"Ah, but I do," Dauntless said smoothly, handing her forward into a curtained alcove where a waiter was holding a tray of drinks ready. "A *woman*, did you say? You mean you're not really a drow princess?"

"A drow princess? No," Qilue replied, curling long fingers around a glass. "Magic can work wonders for the outward appearance, if deftly applied,"

"Your own spellcraft," Dauntless asked, leading her on into a shadowed bower, "or did someone else transform you?"

"Dauntless," the lips so close to his breathed, "that would be telling, now, wouldn't it?"

The Harper moved in close, until their noses were almost touching, and said, "I appreciate both your choice of such a daring disguise, and the skill with which it has been spun."

Her response was a low purr of laughter, and the huskily whispered words, "Go ahead, my lord, test it."

Dauntless looked into her eyes, found a welcome there, and extended his head forward until their lips met. . . and clung, tongues darting a soft duel . . . then tightened, mouth to mouth, bodies melting together.

When at last they broke apart to breathe, Qilue spun deftly out of his arms, and asked, "So, Dauntless: do I pass your test?"

"Several tests, and more, Lady of Mystery. Are you free for the rest of this evening—or any part of it?"

"Regretfully, no, my lord. Business brings me hither, and business must be my master this night. Had I freedom to pursue pleasure, good Dauntless, rest assured that I'd be at your heels, and nowhere else, until dawn—and as long after as you might. . . desire."

"Forgive my forwardness, lady," the Harper murmured, "but tell me, if your true shape returned to you at any time during such a pursuit as you've suggested, would I be aghast? Or disappointed?"

"That, my lord Dauntless, would depend entirely on your own tastes and inclinations," the dark elf said gently, "not, I believe, on whom I turned out to be. I'm not one of the well-known and well-wrinkled noble matrons of the city, gone out to play in a disguise. It is my fond hope that my true shape would not offend you overmuch. Now, if you'll excuse me? That business I mentioned, you understand."

"Of course," the handsome young man agreed, bowing deeply. "The pleasure has been mine."

"Well, someday perhaps 'twill be," she purred in reply, unhurriedly stroking the back of one of his hands, then putting her emptied wine glass into the other, before she stepped away.

Dauntless watched her lilt across the room beyond the bower, through an envious and watchful crowd, and his eyes slowly narrowed. Business here, now, would be what, exactly? What would a drow pretending to be a human wearing the spell shape of a drow be doing here at a revel for nobles and would-be nobles? She'd left suddenly, as if catching sight of someone she wanted to meet. Who?

Dauntless faded in behind a potted fern as the Lady of Mystery turned at the far end of the room to look back,

almost challengingly. Gods, but her lips had been inviting.

He was doomed to spend most of the next hour acting innocent and unobtrusive, trying to stay in the background but within sight of the drow princess as she glided enthusiastically around the revel, letting many men and women test the efficacy of her costume . . . often, Dauntless was sure—though she never once looked in his direction—just to silently tease him.

It wasn't until the end of the second hour, and frequent subterfuges of being either drunk or about to be sick to escape the clutches of enthusiastic matron after smitten matron, that Dauntless thought he saw the guest that his drow princess was shadowing. He wasn't sure until that person—a buxom lady in a plain-fronted mauve gown with shoulder ruffles—moved to a spiral stair masquerading as a large plant stand in one corner of the room, and began to climb it.

The Lady of Mystery moved purposefully, too. She slipped into a dark alcove where a beaded curtain hid her from public view for, it seemed, just long enough. By the time Dauntless drifted up to it, it was empty. The casements of its lone window stood open to the night.

He peered out and up once, quickly and quietly, and was rewarded by the sight of a shapely body the hue of glossy jet climbing up through the shadows of the wall to a stone gargoyle-shaped waterspout protruding from the overhanging balcony on the floor above. It was the same balcony that the spiral stair led to. In another instant, his Lady of Mystery was going to be hanging upside down from that gargoyle, just under one end of the balcony.

He'd have to move like silent lightning, but there was another window—and another gargoyle—at the other end of the balcony, hidden from the Lady of Mystery's perch by the curving buttresses that supported the balcony. Fortunately Dauntless could move like silent lightning, and he did so.

Out and up, thus, and he was there. A pleasant night outside, to be sure. He'd just hang around for a while in the cool night air, to catch whatever words the lady in purple was going to whisper over the balcony rail. He hoped—before all the gods, he hoped—they wouldn't be something that would force him to have to kill his Lady of Mystery.

The voices began, then, and Dauntless got another surprise. The first voice was unfamiliar to him, but he could see from purple ruffles and a moving chin, just visible over the edge of the balcony, that the speaker was the lady in purple. The second belonged to someone who must have been already on the balcony, waiting, and it was a distinctive harsh croak that belonged to only one woman in all Waterdeep. Mrilla Malsander was one of the most ambitious of the rich merchants currently trying to become noble by any means possible. Their words were sinister, but too cryptic to force him to kill anyone.

Qilue clung to the crumbling curves of the snarling gargoyle, and listened intently as the slaver Brelma—who made a very fetching lady in purple, she had to admit—said without any preamble or greeting, "The trouble was a spy, but she's dead now. The project is still unfolding nicely."

"Good," the other lady replied, her voice like the croak of a raven. "See that it continues to do so. If not, you know who to speak with."

With that she turned away and started down the stair, leaving Brelma to look innocently—perhaps wonderingly—out at the lamp-lit night skyline of Waterdeep.

As Qilue swung herself back in through the window, she felt another twinge of the nausea that had plagued her recently, and it strengthened her resolve. Duty to Dove was one thing, but blundering around in Waterdeep making matters worse was another. The time for an expert on drow was past; the time for an expert on the City of Splendors had come . . . and her sister Laeral dwelt not a dozen streets away, in the brooding city landmark of Blackstaff Tower.

Leaving the revel swiftly was simplicity itself. Every Waterdhavian mansion has servants' stairs, and in the shadowed, many-candled light, concealing gloom was everywhere. If her handsome pursuer wanted to come along, he was quite welcome. Whether he was part of those she was investigating or some nosy Waterdhavian watchwolf, Blackstaff Tower should give him something to think about.

One of her own covert contacts in the city had told her that the endless renovations of the tower interior had recently reached a pace she described as "enthusiastic." Hoping the back entrance she remembered still existed, Qilue strolled unconcernedly thence through the streets of the city, acting as if she had every right to be there. The three watch patrols she encountered gave her hard stares, seemed about to challenge her, then thought better of it. She must be a noble matron wealthy enough to squander spells on a party disguise—after all, didn't real drow creep and skulk about, maniacally attacking any human they saw?

With that sarcastic thought still twisting her lips, Qilue came to a certain spot along the curving wall of Blackstaff Tower, turned to face the dark stone, and with her fingertips traced a line to a certain spot. Her fingers dipped into an almost invisible seam, then emerged, moving diagonally a little way down to touch a junction of stone blocks, before—she knelt smoothly—darting into a gap right at ground level. The wall receded silently into itself, magic lending a velvet silence to what should have been a grating of weighty stone. Qilue slipped into a dark embrasure.

It would remain open for only a few seconds before the wall shifted forward again to expel her straight back out onto the street, but if she reached thus, in the darkness, a side way should open.

It did, and Qilue stepped forward through some space of magical darkness, into a dimly lit, curving passage whose inside wall was seamed with many closed cupboard doors, warning radiance flickering around their locks and catches.

What she sought was just ahead: a tall, narrow cupboard or closet door.

There it was. A touch here should open it, and—

The moment she touched the panel, a sickening, tingling feeling told Qilue that something was wrong. The locking spells must have been changed. She stepped hastily back and away from the panel, but the flock of guardian hands bursting out of the outer wall of the passage swerved unerringly toward her, snatching and grabbing with their usual icy accuracy.

With three quick slaps the drow priestess kept them clear of her face and throat, then Qilue simply hunched down, gasping at the pain, and endured their cruel grasps all over the rest of her body. Oh, would she have bruises. . . .

She could try to pry off each of the flying obsidian hands and shatter them before they began their numbing, ultimately paralyzing washes of electricity, but she needed to see Laeral anyway, and a little lock picking would attract immediate attention from the duty apprentice seeing to the wards.

Struggling against the rigid holds of the gripping hands, Qilue plucked the dangling dagger ornament from her crotch, twisted it to its full length, and shielded it in her palm from any guardian-hand strike or clawing. Khelben's one failing was to purchase all of his locks, before he laid spells upon them, from the same dwarven crafter whose work, sold in Skullport to the few who could afford it, was familiar to Qilue. Their maker had shown her the one way to force them open. It required a lock pick of just the right angle . . . like this one.

A sudden movement, a twist, a click, and the panel sighed open. Qilue got her nails under the edge, hauled it open with a strength that surprised the being who was watching her by then, and sprang onward, straight to the next door.



The duty apprentice was attentive. As she moved, the hands began to crawl up her body with bruising force, seeking joints to jam themselves in and her throat to strangle. Qilue snarled her defiance at them as she picked the next door, rushed up a short flight of steps—then threw herself out of the way of the huge iron fist that slammed down across the passage.

The iron golem it belonged to emerged into the narrow way with ponderous care, and by then she was through the door beyond and into a room where spheres of flickering radiance drifted toward her from all sides in menacing, purposeful silence.

"Khelben!" she snapped to the empty air, as magic missiles burst from her hands to destroy these guardians, "Laeral! Call off your watchwolves. I've no wish to destroy them."

Numbing lightning was leaping from the hands on her body, playing across her skin until she hissed at the pain and stumbled like a drunken dockhand under their punishment. The next door was there, but could she reach it?

Grimly Qilue staggered on, gesturing rudely at a crystal sphere that descended from the dimness near the ceiling. Its depths held a voice that said, "She called on the lord and lady master! We'd best open the doors." It also held the frightened face of a young man sitting at a glowing table, who stared out of the sphere at the struggling intruder and gasped, "But she's a drow!"

"Get Laeral!" Qilue roared. "Bring her to me, or I'll start *really* destroying things." In sudden fury she tore a crawling guardian hand from her breast, waved it at the sphere, and hurled it to the floor, bounding onto it with all her strength and ignoring the lightning it spat around her boots as it died. "Are you deaf, duty apprentice?"

"You hear? She knows our duties. She must be—"

"Half Waterdeep has heard of the defenses of Blackstaff Tower," the young man said scornfully. "She's a dark elf, and *I'm* not letting any dark elf into this room with us."

"But—"

"But nothing. You've always been too soft, Araeralee. You'd let Szass Tam of Thay in here, if he put on the body of a beautiful maid and whimpered at the door! How do we know that isn't him now? Or Manshoon of the Zhentarim, up to another of his tricks?"

"Well, I'm rousing Lady Laeral to decide for—"

"Araeralee, don't you dare! This is my duty watch, and—dark gods take you, wench! You've done it! You've burning well gone and done it. It'll be the lash of spells for you, once I tell Khelben. Now I'm going to have to rouse all the apprentices . . . don't you know we're supposed to do that first, before bothering the masters? *Drown* you!"

"Drown you, enthusiastic young idiot," Qilue snarled at the sphere, as she forced the lock of the next door and came out into a large, many-pillared chamber that by rights shouldn't have fit within the tower walls. The chamber was rapidly filling with barefoot, sleepy-eyed apprentices.

"A drow!" one of them gasped, and others quickly took up the cry. Young faces frowned in fear and determination, and young hands moved in a weaver's nightmare of complicated gestures.

In a chamber whose domed ceiling winked with glimmering stars, Laeral stirred, lifting her head from Khelben's bare, hairy shoulder. The chiming came again, and the Lord Mage of Waterdeep answered it with a louder, barking snore. Laeral's lips twisted in wry amusement. Of course.

She sat up, her silvery hair stirring around her bare shoulders, and sighed. The books they'd been studying lay spread open around them on the bed, abandoned for slumber, and Laeral carefully lifted her long legs over them

as she rolled off the bed, plucked up a robe, and went to see what was wrong.

She was still padding down the tower stairs with a crystal sphere of stored spells winking ready in her hand when she heard shouts from below, the whoosh of released magic, then a blast that shook the entire tower. She lurched against the wall, cradling the sphere to keep it from a shattering fall—and was promptly flung across the stair by another, even more powerful blast.

"True trouble," she murmured to the world at large, then launched herself down the stairs in a long glide that called on the stairway enchantments to let her fly. The tower shuddered and shook under another blast before she hit the bottom, and a long, racing crack opened in the wall beside her. Laeral lifted her eyebrows at it as she plunged through an archway where dust was drifting down—and headlong into the battle raging below.

"Gods above!" Dauntless murmured. The door he'd seen the drow slip through banged open in front of his nose, and dust swirled out. There was a dull, rolling boom, and doors and windows creaked and slammed all over the tower. "I must be crazed to leap into this," he murmured, touched the silver harp badge pinned to the inside throat of his jacket for luck, and trotted into the booming darkness.

Not far away, in the shadow of another building, a cloaked and hooded figure the Harper hadn't noticed nodded to itself and turned away.

The passages inside were an inferno of whirling spell energies, swirling dust, and shouts, but he could follow their fury up and on, stumbling in the gloom. He came out into a room whose floor was cracked and tilted crazily, where dust-cloaked figures knelt and scrambled and waved their arms in spellcasting.

In their midst, standing alone in a ring of fires in the center of the room, was his beautiful Lady of Mystery. Shards of black glass lay all around her, something that looked like

silver smoke boiled away from her sweat-bedewed body, and fury blazed out of her dark face. He almost cowered back at the sight of it. In his moment of hesitation, a white-faced young man in flapping robes bounded out from behind a pillar with a long, bared sword in his hand. Green glowing runes shimmered up and down its heavy blade as he charged at the drow.

Spells slammed into the dark elf from three sides as he ran, almost tripping over the embroidered edge of his robe. She was staggering helplessly in their grip when he skidded to a halt, grimly aimed his blade, and with both hands thrust it through her flat belly. The Lady of Mystery coughed silver fire almost into the duty apprentice's face. He reeled back as the sword shattered with a wild shrieking, spat bright shards away in all directions, and slumped into dust around the convulsed dark elf.

The young wizard hurled himself away in real horror as silver fire scorched his cheek and he realized who—or rather, *what*—this intruder must be. A cold, bright golden glow cracked across the chamber, and Dauntless found himself slammed back against its wall in the company of all of the dusty-robed figures.

A furious Lady Mage of Waterdeep strode barefooted into the center of the room, snarling, "Is *this* the hospitality of Blackstaff Tower?"

In the utter silence that followed her shout, Laeral set down a crystal sphere she'd been carrying and strode toward the drow who was standing upright again, silver fire blazing up around her in an unearthly nimbus of glowing smoke.

Laeral's unbound hair swirled around her as she stretched forth her hands, like a mother desiring a daughter's embrace, and asked in a voice not far from tears, "Sister—too long unseen—what troubles you?"

"My own ineptitude," Qilue replied, and burst into tears. She swayed amid silver flames, weeping, for a long moment, then, with a sob, she rushed into Laeral's waiting arms.

## Laeral

### Lady Cassalanter's Busy Day

*Of all the ladies fair whom I would fain smile upon me, she whose smile is worth the most is the Lady Mage of Waterdeep. Laeral hath given me a nod of approval, and the memory of it shall be a light in the back of my mind all the rest of my days.*

Zantravas Rolovantar,  
Lord Chamberlain of Castle Waterdeep  
from *Forty Years Before The Doors: A Life In Service*  
published circa the Year of the Wyvern

"Oh, most clever tongue, save me now!" Dauntless breathed aloud, as silently as he could, then stepped boldly around a pillar and joined the hasty throng of apprentices darting back out of the shattered, dust-choked chamber where their brave defense of Blackstaff Tower had just ended.

He kept his head down and matched the pace of those padding barefoot up the stairs, and had climbed an entire flight, turned on a landing, and mounted another before the expected snarl came from just behind him: "Ho! *You*—in the boots—hold hard. You're not one of us. Stand still, or be blasted to ashes."

Dauntless stiffened, sighed, and came to a reluctant halt. A hand took rough hold of his elbow and a shrill, excited voice near his ear said, "Try nothing. There's a spell dagger floating just beside your throat, ready to slay you if you try anything, anything at all!"

Dauntless was just opening his mouth to assure the speaker that he'd offer no violence when a hitherto-smooth section of wall opened like a door. A face like a scowling lion—a lion sporting a neatly trimmed pepper-and-salt beard—looked out of it.

The Lord Mage of Waterdeep glared past Dauntless and asked testily, "Is *that* all you've learned, of what we've been teaching you? Blast and threaten, blast and threaten? You sound like Zhentarim, not apprentices on the road to real mastery of magic. Take down that dagger spell this instant!"

"But, Lor—"

"You stand in my tower and dare to utter me 'buts'? Are you looking for a swift barefoot tour of the Great Glacier? Or just a month spent as my boot scraper?"

"Ah ... uh, yes, Lord Ma—I mean *no*, Lord Mage! The spell is—aha, there—gone!"

"Good. As your spell is, make yourself so."

"Yes, Lord Mage," the voice agreed hastily. Dauntless heard the receding slap of bare feet hurrying away.

The Blackstaff put out a hand to Dauntless, and said, "Come, handsome Harper. I've a task for you."

"Lord Khelben?"

"Lad, just step into this secret passage sharp like, and refrain from asking foolish questions every second breath and behold . . . you'll be twice the apprentice of magic most of these dolts are."

"In a good mood tonight, are we?" Dauntless couldn't help but ask—in the quietest of whispers—as he slipped into the passage after the archmage.

Khelben neither turned nor slowed, but did observe aloud as they began to climb a narrow flight of stairs, "A true Harper! No judgment for his own safety, and far too quick and clever with his tongue. Yes, you'll do nicely." Dauntless sighed then, but took care to make it utterly silent.

"And don't sigh," Khelben said from somewhere above. "We Who Harp are striving for a stoic, even eager image, not resigned acceptance of being manipulated. Right?"

The Dark Sister stiffened in Laeral's arms. "What are you—?"

"Easy, sister," the Lady Mage of Waterdeep said, stroking Qilue's tense, trembling back. "A little soothing

spell to go with the healing. Relax. There is no more danger for you here—and never was any treachery or deceit."

Qilue gave a little, shuddering sigh, then slumped against Laeral, who deftly called on a waiting spell to hold them both up. Floating together amid the drifting dust of the shattered chamber, the two sisters held each other like a drowsy, comfortable couple, and talked as Qilue was slowly and gently made whole again.

The shuddering she-drow was jet black of complexion, but the woman who stroked and soothed her had skin tanned the lightest hint of gold. Her silver hair, tousled earlier in her angry haste, was carefully gathering itself into tidiness as the two sisters, limbs locked together, gently revolved in midair. The Lady Mage of Waterdeep had large, liquid eyes of a dancing emerald green and an impish nose that drew the eye to her fine features. Her face had a natural beauty that made young male apprentices and men walking in the city streets swallow and—eventually—find the need to visibly and reluctantly wrench their own gazes away from. Even barefoot and simply garbed, she radiated high station and gentle authority. Kindness and concern were the cloaks that enfolded her at every moment.

Laeral was still apologizing earnestly for the apprentices' attack when Qilue fixed her with dark, solemn eyes and interrupted.

"Sister, I have a favor to ask of you, as Dove asked it of me. My kind—dark elves, but not of Eilistraee; rather, cruel folk from the realms below—have for some time been infiltrating the city of Scornubel, taking the places of humans who are sold into slavery or slain. Dove asked me to investigate, and I followed a drow high in the ranks of the Scornubrian impersonators . . ."

"To here," Laeral realized, nodding grimly. "Whom did she meet with?"

"Do you know an ambitious woman by the name of Mrilla Malsander?" Qilue asked. As the Lady Mage of

Waterdeep nodded, she laid a hand on Laeral's arm and added, "This is more than slavery, sister. The slaver I followed here spoke of all the impersonations in Scornubel simply as 'the project,' implying that these two, and the others they work with, deal in other matters."

"Did you not know?" Laeral asked in response, almost bitterly. "Other places grow corn, or barley, but here in hard-paved Waterdeep, we have healthy crops too. We grow conspiracies."

Three heads were bent together over the bright crystal ball. With something approaching awe, Dauntless shifted his eyes to the man on his left—Khelben "Blackstaff" Arunsun, the Lord Mage of Waterdeep—then to the man on his right—Mirt the Moneylender, widely believed to be one of the secret lords of the city. Both were real, both were very much larger than life, and both were but inches from him. A wineglass was clutched in the fat merchant's large and battered right hand.

"Names, my dear," Khelben muttered, his eyes never leaving the scene in the depths of the crystal. "Don't be shy. Get some names. *What* slaver? Who in Scornubel is now a disguised drow and not a human? Heh?"

"Hmm," Mirt rumbled. "If this started a few decades back, it might explain some of our trading experiences down there. Yes, get me names, so I'll know who to drop in on next time I'm down that way—so I can ask some *persuasive* questions."

Khelben nodded and held up a hand for silence.

The three men heard Laeral Silverhand say solemnly, "You have my word, sister. Your task is now mine, though I begin to suspect we may have to turn the delving over to others among our fellow Chosen in time. Darling Mrilla I know—in passing, but still far better than I'd like to—but if this slaver of yours is still in Waterdeep, take me to see her: I always like to have two strings to pluck, and not just one."



Qilue smiled, nodded, and asked, "Now? I'm no longer tired or hurt, but the magic left to me is not what it could be."

Laeral shrugged. "I'm awake now, so why not? I can lug along enough Art for us both to hurl. We'll go openly, to see which rats scurry to their holes, and who decides they're lion enough to meet our challenge. Would you care for something to eat, or drink, or shall we 'went' without tarrying longer?"

Qilue grinned. "Let's 'went.' "

Laeral smiled, nodded, then rolled over in the air to stare straight at her unseen lord and said meaningfully, "And you stay out of this, dear."

As she spoke, her magic restored her sister's hair to its true silver hue. Mirt and Dauntless looked silently at Khelben, not quite daring to smile.

The Lord Mage of Waterdeep nodded calmly, sketched a tiny gesture with two fingers, and replied, "Of course I shall, lady." Without waiting for her reply, he passed his hand over the scrying sphere, which went dark in an instant.

Khelben sat back from it and added, his lips not quite forming a smile as he turned his head from Mirt to Dauntless then back again, "Which is why you two are going to follow the Lady Mage of Waterdeep and her sister, and see what they get up to. If it's needful, give them a helping hand, or at least ensure that the Harpers learn of what's unfolding."

He crooked a finger, and a tiny sphere of light spun itself out of nothing above his head and descended to hang in front of his nose, spinning gently. "This may be nothing more than drow spying, but I have a feeling it's deeper. I don't like it when I get feelings like that. They're too often all too well founded. This glowsphere will guide you out of here and keep you close to my Lady Laeral, If you need to speak to me, touch it. Some say 'fare well,' but that's not good enough. Good sirs, fare better."

With that the Lord Mage of Waterdeep turned away to devote his full attention to what filled the far side of the otherwise dark chamber: the ever-changing scenes in the bright depths of a dozen or more floating, flickering, keg-sized crystal spheres.

A pale, dead, green-white glow bathed the pillars in a ghostly light. Fresh corpses—human hireswords or adventurers, by their garb—were sprawled along the lowest ramshackle catwalk, arms and legs dangling down to where they almost brushed the lazily-stirring silver tresses of the two strolling women. Neither so much as looked up. Skullport hardens the heart and claws at the throat, as the saying went . . . and both of them knew it all too well.

"My kind!" Qilue described their quarry, her eyes never idle as she peered all around in ceaseless scrutiny. "Shorter, of course, above her right temple a lock of smoke-hued hair among the usual white ... all of it worn long. Eyes that snap, temper to match, but not a fool. Graceful, answers to the name of Brelma."

"How long will your tracer last?"

"Until she or another deliberately dispels it. Of course, the longer it remains the more likely it is to be discovered."

Laeral sighed and tossed her head, her flowing silver hair dancing around her shoulders. "We really should meet like this more often, just to chat about the passing parade of anything and everything, not just matters at hand as we save Faerun one more time."

"We should," Qilue agreed, as they came to a stretch of street relatively free of inky puddles, creeping fungi, and lights. "Yet who in Faerun beyond prisoners in chains ever has enough time to do all they'd like to?"

The drow priestess reached several tresses of her unbound, living hair forward to precede her softly padding boots as she strode on into the deep gloom. From inside the waves of hair came a razor sharp thief's fingerblade. The

illicit tool, wielded by one probing tendril of hair, sliced through a tripwire.

A crossbow quarrel thrummed out of the darkness, struck stone chips off the wall beside Laeral's head, and rebounded into the endless night that shrouded so much of this end of Skullport. Somewhere not all that far away, a raw, throat-stripping scream arose. From another direction there came the sudden, ground shaking thud of an explosion.

The two sisters ignored both the attack and the sounds as they walked unconcernedly on, talking of the newest plays mounted in the city. A suitably disguised Laeral often attended performances, but for Qilue, an expedition into Waterdeep entailed seeing to so many details beforehand that she didn't want to waste an evening on poorer mummeries. Drama critics she trusted were in short supply among the faithful of Eilistraee.

Their unseen assailant, obviously either dumbfounded or impressed by their complete lack of concern for his efforts, mounted no additional attacks.

*"Lord Alurmal's Double-Edged Revenge? A farce; some clever lines, but most of it's the usual swapping-beds-with-servants-eavesdropping-in-the-closet show,"* the Lady Mage of Waterdeep said, dismissing the most recent theatrical offering. *"The city's all a-clack because two of the dandy-prats talk only in words that certain of our stuffier noble lords have been heard to use . . . and those two lords are, to put it mildly, black in the face with ongoing rage."*

"I almost fear to ask what 'dandy-prats' might be," Qilue said lightly, watching another tripwire snap, its severed ends recoiling into the deepest shadows. She waved cheerfully at a cowed form emerging hastily from a lightless doorway. It came to an abrupt, uncertain halt, failing to follow as they turned down a side-stair into a lower way. There mobile, refuse-eating fluttercap mushrooms stood like a quivering, ankle-deep carpet.

"Loudly idiotic, empty-headed parodies of the most brainless of our young nobility," Laeral explained. " 'Prat' because they're there to make all the stupidest pratfalls, and 'dandy' because of their lampooning-all-overblown-fashions appearances."

"Dare I ask about a play that bears the title *The Elf Queen's Peculiar Pleasure*?" the drow priestess asked mildly, stepping around a hobgoblin who stood like a small mountain in the center of the street. His eyes were narrow with menace, and his axe was dripping fresh gore, but he did no more than rumble half-heard profanities at the sisters as they slipped past.

Laeral winced. "You may, of course, dare anything you desire, sister, but be aware that a fat, hairy male actor made up to look like a half-orc plays the Elf Queen, and that ... er ... 'her' peculiar pleasure is to steal and devour sweets from Waterdhavian noble matrons ... all of whom are portrayed by heavily stubbled male actors interested in the very coarsest form of heavy handed, simpering, 'ooh and ah' clowning. The title may suggest illicit, steamy matters, but the play delivers the oldest groaning jests with a leering enthusiasm."

Qilue looked at her sister with some amusement. "Borrowing opinions, Lady Mage? That last sentence came straight from One-Eyed Jack's review in the last *Waterdeep Watch* broadsheet."

"And whom did you think One-Eyed Jack was, hmm?" Laeral replied sweetly. "One of my favorite guises. After all, some of our worst playwrights have openly offered blood bounties to anyone who can bring them Jack's head on a platter."

"A Chosen has to take pride in something," the drow priestess agreed, wrinkling her nose. Her eyes danced, and she added, "Perhaps I'll take up acting—or writing plays. Yes. Ho, now . . . *Death And The Wanton Wizard*. That has a ring to it."

"Qilue," her sister said warningly, "don't start."

One eyebrow crooked in reply. "Start? I never stop." Her face changed and she purred, "Have some fire ready, sister."

A moment later, the tangleweb net settled down softly over them. Laeral's magic sent it melting away amid plumes of thick green and purple smoke. Somewhere out of its roiling the severed end of a catwalk plunged down like a giant's mace, smashed the Lady Mage of Waterdeep off her feet and solidly against the nearest wall, and withdrew in splintered disarray.

Laeral peeled herself off the bloody stone with her own gore streaming out of her nose and down one side of her face, and a stormy glint in her eyes. Another tangleweb net was drifting down onto their heads, and a mauve skinned, glistening figure in purple robes had appeared behind Qilue. One of its tentacles wrapped around her throat, and the other began questing its way up into her face.

The tiny sparkling of a defensive magical field was already gathering around the grotesquely linked couple as Laeral snarled in anger and lifted her hands to rend herself some mind flayer. Then someone opened a shuttered window high above her and emptied a coal scuttle full of old cobblestones onto her head.

When she came reeling dazedly to her feet again, she was in time to see the illithid standing in triumph over a sagging Seventh Sister.

"Qilue," Laeral cried, calling down lightning out of the air to dance ready on both of her palms, "shield yourself!"

"There's no need," the drow priestess replied, twisting around to face her. Laeral gasped in horror.

A mottled, slime-glistening tentacle had plunged into where Qilue's left eye had been, and was surging inward and upward, pulsing with a horrible hunger.

"Sister?" Laeral hissed, a fire kindling in her eyes to match the dancing dazzlements in her hands. "Shall I?"

Obsidian lips gasped as their owner winced, shook her head, then said, "Well, you might deal with the other two. They're heading for you before and behind. This one's linked to them. I can feel the three trading thoughts like hungry little wolves."

Lightning split the gloom of the subterranean city of Skullport with a sound like a rolling, booming clap of thunder. Two skeletons danced briefly in the dying afterglow before collapsing into ash. The crumbling tendrils of yet another tangleweb net slumped and dangled down on all sides, melting away into smoke, as Laeral turned and snarled, "Is your hungry little wolf still so eager?"

"I feel like gagging," Qilue remarked calmly. "It numbs, and yet it burns. A moment or two more and it'll touch my brain, and—ahhh! Here we go. . . ."

The drow priestess threw her shoulders back down onto the trodden stones of the street and arched her back, her body quivering with effort . . . but its straining was nothing compared to the stiffening then frantic squalling spasms of the illithid above her. A glistening mauve hand clawed ineffectually at the air, the stifled echo of a bubbling scream arose, and the mind flayer reeled away, sightless eyes smoking, dead on its feet.

A silver plume of flame arose within the gaping ruin of Qilue's face and snarled around its torn flesh like a buzzing fly. Laeral hissed in concern and lifted her fingers to trace the intricate gestures of a spell that called on Qilue's unharmed eye to spin itself a new match. She held her kneeling sister's head steady with a hand laced through Qilue's restlessly twisting hair, and looked around in all directions for the approach of fresh danger as the spell did its slow work.

What she saw instead were a lot of spying eyes sliding back into concealment. In the distant gloom where the fluttercap mushrooms ended and the street turned to join another passage between unwelcoming stone buildings, a

drow with a smoky lock of hair stood looking back over her shoulder at the two sisters.

*Ah, Brelma, doubtless deliberately leading us into trap after trap.*

The Lady Mage of Waterdeep sent that thought directly to her sister, and Qilue replied aloud, "Of course—and I appreciate the effort she's going to. Many folks wouldn't have taken all this trouble." Her voice was more wry than bitter.

Laeral lifted an eyebrow, then sighed. "There are, however, always the favorite few . . ."

Something in her voice made Qilue look up. Her one good eye glanced along the street to where Brelma was hastily ducking around the corner of a building, in time to see a trio of leather-armored men trot out of an alley with wound and cocked crossbows in their hands. They ranged themselves into a line, loaded their weapons, took aim—as noises on all sides of the sisters marked the arrival of many of their fellows—and fired.

The air was full of quarrels as the Lady Mage of Waterdeep thrust Qilue's head to the ground and threw herself flat. The drow priestess turned over as quarrels cracked and rattled on the stones all around her. She opened her mouth to shape a spell. She was still wondering why Laeral hadn't already done so when she saw the reason.

From out of the dark tangle of decaying balconies, laundry lines, and crossing catwalks high above them, an all too familiar shape was descending—a sphere of bony plates split by a wide, crooked, many-toothed mouth that was clearly smiling. A beholder. A wriggling fringe of wormlike eyestalks could be seen around one curve of the body, and above that unfriendly smile, the eye tyrant's large central orb was fixed unwaveringly on the two Chosen. Laeral hissed something in the frantic instant before that eye erupted in the softly racing cone of pale light that consumed and doused all magic it touched.

"Not a very stylish trap," Qilue snarled, the first cold whispers of fear rising in her. "Not that it needs to be." Without magic, they were simply two tall and unarmored targets lying in the midst of a ring of crossbow-men who undoubtedly had daggers in plenty to use when their quarrels were all spent.

A wet thump came from somewhere very near, and Qilue heard her sister gasp.

"Laeral?" she cried, rolling over with no thought for the ring of grim men closing in carefully around them, or the beholder hanging so close above. "Sister?"

"What was that foolishness I said earlier about finding out who the lions were?" Laeral asked, her voice tight with pain. A dark, heavy war-quarrel stood out of one of her shoulders, threads of silver smoke stirring away from the wound, and from between the fingers she held pressed against her right flank, tongues of silver flame were licking.

"Laeral!" Qilue gasped, crawling hastily forward. "Lie still, and let me . . ."

"Die right beside her," one of the crossbowmen said coldly.

Qilue looked up to find a ring of ready bows aimed at her head. There were a dozen or more, even with most of the warriors out of the fray back behind these men, winding their spent weapons like madmen. The gentle light washing over her left her no need to look up at the lowering bulk of the beholder overhead, or to hope for any escape. The lead crossbowman jerked his head in a curt signal, and bows snapped forth speeding death.

"Too late!" the Old Wolf snarled. "We're going to be too bloody late. *Move*, youngling!"

Dauntless, a good twenty paces ahead and sprinting hard over loose, rolling stones and greasy, best unseen alley refuse, didn't bother to reply. His blade was in his hand, but he was still a good seventy feet or more from the back of the nearest bowman in the ring—to say nothing of the half a



dozen or so of their fellows kneeling in his way and cranking their bows, or the monstrous beholder floating overhead.

They didn't look to be taking prisoners, or pausing for a moment of gloating. The men stank of fear. Even as Dauntless hurled himself into a desperate, reckless sprint, bows hummed. The archers flung themselves hastily back and down, boots scraping on stone, to avoid being struck by ricocheting bolts fired by their fellows facing them across the deadly ring.

And so it was that the young Harper, with Mirt puffing along like a furious walrus in his wake, had a clear view of two beautiful bodies arching and twisting in agony. Silver flames roared up in sudden, street shaking fury—to the obvious surprise of the beholder hanging so low overhead.

That was all he saw before everything in front of him vanished in blinding, silvery light. The very stones of the street rose up to smite him, dashing him back, back into waiting ... hard . . . things. . . .

Something dark and tentacled drew back from a spell-shrouded window in Skullport and said coldly to something else in the same room, "Come, and watch fools die. It's futile—even fatal—to strike directly at the Chosen, If you can trick them into working for you, though.. . ."

Something else took two eager, slithering strides before the street outside the window exploded.

Qilue had always hated arrows. Quarrels, darts, and slung stones, too; anything that enabled some coward to deal death from a safe distance. Yet her fairness drove her through mounting pain to admit that those archers probably hated and feared the spells she could unleash on them—often from a safer distance—as much, or more. The torment dragged her away from that thought, letting it recede into a crimson distance regardless of her feeble attempts to claw and cling to something—anything—more than the raging pain.

Qilue sobbed, or tried to, and flailed her shuddering limbs about despairingly. The drow priestess wallowed in gut wrenching agony around four quarrels crossed in her breast and belly, struggling to swallow as fire boiled up in her throat and choked her.

Laeral was twisting in similar torment, her body a small forest of crossbow bolts. Snarling and rolling back and forth, she looked more like a spiny beast than the Lady Mage of Waterdeep. Silver fire spat to the stones, spraying down as Laeral tore quarrels from her flesh and threw them, flaming, away. When the flames rushed out of her in a sudden gout that sent Khelben's consort sprawling onto her face on the stones, she shrieked, rolled over heedless of the quarrels still in her back, and sent the boiling, raging flames straight up into the air like a lance stabbing up at the beholder.

Her roll had forced some of the remaining quarrels right through her. They burst up out of her front, spewing flames. Laeral lashed the blazing eye tyrant with those flames, her face savage. Its central eye went dark, melting away into ruin as the beholder erupted in flames and started to spin, its great mouth yawning open in a wet, bubbling roar of agony.

By then, Qilue had managed to get to her knees, her every breath a searing flood of wet and blazing silver.

She looked up through the flames of her own blood at the bowmen before her. Some were still scrambling up, plucking up bows, and trotting hastily away to where others had finished cranking their bows and were readying quarrels for another shot. Qilue snarled, dipped one hand into the wetness at her belly and spat out the words Mystra had taught her so long ago. Lines of spilling fire raced from her fingertips. She aimed at bowmen's eyes with the same ruthlessness they'd shown her. In moments they were staggering, shrieking, and falling with enthusiasm.

Qilue turned, crouching low as a few quarrels whistled past her, and dealt blindness all around the ring. As she

came around to where she'd begun, leaving only a few crouching bowmen unscathed, the beholder cartwheeled into view, shrinking into blackened wrinkles as it spun away down the street. It struck the side of a building and tore away most of a wooden balcony. Laeral rose unsteadily, the last burned remnants of the quarrels that had transfixed her falling away from her blackened body, and hurled a spell at it with both hands.

Fire burst forth in brilliance above the street, and the beholder fell into ashes amid its tumbling embers. Laeral wasted no time in watching its destruction, but turned with threads of silver sparks leaping between her fingers. "Have you left me any?" she asked her sister.

Qilue managed a smile, tongues of silver flame hissing out to lick her nose, and gasped, "A few."

Laeral nodded, looked around at the stumbling bowmen, and decided no quarrels would be immediately forthcoming. She looked back at Qilue, clucked and frowned at her sister's condition, and reached out to heal, with fire dancing from her fingertips.

The drow priestess hissed in relief and pressed against the Lady Mage's soothing touch. As Qilue let go the last of her pain with a groan, Laeral murmured wordless comfort, and glanced over one of her sister's ebony shoulders. Her gaze met the wondering eyes of a man not all that far away, and she gave him a glare that brought silver fire leaping into her eyes for just a moment.

Mirt, his hands under the arms of a groggy, Dauntless, did not need a more pointed command. He nodded and started dragging the young Harper, hastily back into an alley. Mirt was not, Laeral noted, the only man seeking to hastily depart the street.

Laeral nodded her satisfaction at that, pressed her fingertips to one last wound of her own—high up, where her breast started to become her shoulder—and asked Qilue,

"Were you thinking of sparing any of these oh-so-brave bowmen?"

"Two," the priestess replied, "sighted and whole. A hare to lead us, and a spare, should ill befall that hare. Brelma's long gone—and what good is a sprung trap if it leaves us no trail onward?"

"I'll need you to writhe and stagger, then," Laeral murmured, "at the same moment I do. They're firing one last volley." The radiance that leaked from her fingers then was blue-white, not silver, but threaded faintly through the wisps of smoke around them.

When the quarrels came again, Laeral twisted away and whistled a curse at how close one had come to her throat. She threw up her arms and cried out. As the other bolts clattered on the stones beyond the two falsely staggering Chosen, the air all around blazed with cold, eerie blue fire. Laeral stopped acting agonized in an instant, and stood tall to gaze in all directions.

Her sister straightened more slowly, watching the Lady Mage with a smile of comprehension. They could see out, but no eye could pierce the roiling fire. When it faded, no doubt, Laeral's magic would have done its work on the eyes of both sisters. Unless Qilue was very much mistaken, they'd soon be plunging into real darkness.

"I see five still on their feet," the Lady Mage of Waterdeep said crisply, glowing spell bolts leaping from her fingertips. The blue-white missiles sped away, arcing high up into the gloom above the street. "Have I missed anyone?"

Qilue looked all around, seeing only the five bowmen who'd fired that last volley. They were now standing peering at the two sisters as if they couldn't see down the street properly. As Qilue watched, Laeral's missiles descended from above to smite down three of them in a deadly whirlwind. At the sight of those deaths the last two bowmen exchanged a glance—and in unspoken accord they turned and fled.

"Just those two," the drow priestess replied brightly.

Laeral gave her a sour look, then wrinkled her nose and said, "Thanks."

Qilue sketched a flowing bow some Waterdhavian noble had made to her at the revel, and asked, "Do we run after them, or have you a spell handy to whisk us to their boot heels?"

"I have three such," Laeral replied, and smiled. "Shall we run a little, first?"

"And leave the two Harpers breathless?" Qilue responded. "Why not?"

"You see?" The cold voice held no triumph, only calm comfort in knowing the true measure of powers abroad in the world. Tentacles lifted a goblet of wine that steamed and bubbled.

"Yes," someone else replied shortly, slithering away to affix a cloak over the cage where a pet barking snake had been roused to noisy alarm. "Not that the lesson was less than obvious. Chosen of Mystra are always best left alone."

"Well, some folk never learn that lesson," the cold voice pointed out, setting the goblet carefully down again. It was empty. Goblets were always too small, these days.

After the third turning, Laeral took Qilue's wrist and steered her off into an alcove that had once been someone's cellar. They were both breathing heavily, but the bowmen ahead of them were panting and staggering.

"Time for a spell," the Lady Mage gasped.

"Invisibility?"

Laeral wrinkled her nose. "Ah, you guessed."

"Sister," Qilue said severely, "have we time? I don't want to lose them. They know their way; they go in haste, and the leader seldom flashes his glowstone."

Laeral nodded, murmured an invisibility spell in deft and elegant haste, touched Qilue, then tugged her back out into the passage.

"You run ahead," the Lady Mage gasped as they picked up speed again, "and I'll do myself when I get the chance."

We'll still be able to see each other with this enchantment. I've a fair idea where they're headed, anyway, and they're winded. They'll have to stop soon, or collapse."

"They're not the only ones," Qilue gasped back, then squeezed her sister's arm affectionately and let go, sprinting ahead into the darkness.

"Holy Mystra forbend," Laeral puffed, watching the youngest of the Seven Sisters vanish into the gloom like a black arrow. "I'm getting too old for this."

She whirled around, half-expecting to hear Mirt's sarcastic rumble coming out of the darkness to tell her she wasn't the only one, but the darkness remained silent. The Lady Mage of Waterdeep looked down at the scorched remnants of her clothing, decided that was just as well, and started running. By the time she reached the first bend in the passage, she decided she wasn't too tardy an arrow herself.

The bowmen staggered to a halt, groaning, and swiped sweat from their eyes with their forearms. One held out a glowstone and felt for the chain at his throat as the other turned his back and drew a dagger, staring warily all around.

The darkness remained empty and still, filled with the rasp of their own hard breathing and the usual reek of the nearby sewers. With a sigh of relief the man with the glowstone thrust the long-barreled key on the end of his chain into a crack between two uneven wall stones, and turned it. There was a gentle grating sound, and the man pulled on the key. It brought a smallish stone block out of the wall with it, into his waiting palm. The Bowman reached into the cavity the stone had filled, drew out the mummified husk of a spider, and let it drift down to the passage floor as he reached farther into the hole, turned something, then set his shoulder against the wall. It growled once, then with a low, reluctant grating sound, yielded inward, revealing itself to be a short, wide door.

The man with the dagger took the glowstone with a snarled, "Hurry!" The bowman with the key slipped through the opened door, struck alight a lantern hanging just inside, then shoved the door closed from within.

The remaining bowman replaced spider and block with barely concealed impatience then shifted his weight uneasily from one foot to another, his eyes on the passage from whence they'd come. "Hurry, damn you!" he growled, glaring up at the wall above the door. As if it had heard him, a row of stones there slid inward in unison, dropping away to reveal an opening along the ceiling of the passage that would admit a crawling man. A rope appeared through this gap and descended, the key on its neck chain tinkling at the end of it. The bowman sheathed his dagger, locked the stone block, then clambered up the wall in almost feverish haste, the glowstone in his teeth.

He was still rolling through the gap in the ceiling when something invisible came sprinting out of the gloom. Unseen hands drew a dagger whose blade was as slender as a needle and as dull and black as tar, set it on the floor pointing to the wall exactly under one end of the open gap, then—as the stones grated hastily back into place—hurried back the way it had come.

Once she'd gone far enough to regain her breath without her panting being heard from the opening she'd found, Qilue sat down against the wall and waited until the Lady Mage of Waterdeep came up to her in the darkness.

"Your favorite stretch of wall?"

"The same," the drow priestess replied with a grin, and slapped Laeral's behind affectionately as she rose. Ah, but it'd felt good to be a freebooting adventurer for a few days, she thought. I am going to miss this.

"Was that a victory pat and you're going to show me two bodies," Laeral asked, "or—?"

"I'm going to show you my dagger in a moment," Qilue said tersely. "Now find and keep silence—for once—and

come. Bring a wraithform spell, if you've got one ... or one of those blast-everything-to-the-gods spells if you don't."

"I can provide either," Laeral murmured into her younger sister's ear as Qilue took hold of her wrist and led her forward.

With catlike stealth the two Chosen went to where Qilue's dagger lay. The priestess indicated the size and edges of the ceiling opening with her hands, then touched the Lady Mage to send the silent thought;

*Stone blocks receded into a space behind that wall, up there, and have now returned to their places. Both men went through, after some complications. How many wraithforms have you?*

Laeral sighed soundlessly. *Just one . . . for you?*

*No. You know the city better—and if 'twould be best to slay them or leave them be. If there's no gap through down here, I've magic enough to hold you aloft, up there.*

Laeral nodded, cast the spell on herself, then seemed to flow into the wall.

Qilue listened intently for a long time, then let out her own long, soundless sigh, leaned back against the cold, rough stones of the passage wall, and let herself sag wearily.

Steeling herself against the stench of the sewers, she settled herself into another silent wait. This one was less patient than the last. She found herself hoping that handsome young Harper would turn up again. Yes, she was going to miss this very much.

The cellar was large, damp, and equipped with bells on the wall that could send signals up metal rods to places above. Laeral kept to its darkest corner as the two bowmen looked gloomily at those bells then at the adjacent stone door. The two agreed grimly that they'd wait until morning to give a report that was going to be received with rage. They went on a quick search for rats among the pile of empty crates that filled one end of the cellar. Finding none, the bowmen set their lantern on the floor to burn itself out,



and took two of the rough rope mattresses slung along one wall. Once they'd settled uneasily off to sleep, Laeral drifted silently around the cellar, inspecting the other things it held. Among the items there were a long coffer bar with manacles, rows of body irons hung on a wall, and two casks that—if several small, dried puddles could be trusted—held the rich, dark, drugged wine known as "slavesleep."

Well, it wasn't exactly trumpet blaring news that the owner of this particular cellar was slave-dealing. Laeral wondered briefly just how many cellars, in the labyrinth of underways beneath the streets and houses of Waterdeep, held similar incriminating items. Or worse, like the one that had been found knee-deep in bodies drowned in brandy to keep down the smell, or the monster-fighting pit under Cat Alley, or ...

Why drow, though? And why Mrilla Malsander? The reach was too needlessly broad and bold for just kidnapping and slaving. This was something bigger ...

Not that these two would know anything of use, even if she'd been carrying the right magic to get it out of them.

One of the men muttered something unintelligible but fearful in his slumber. The Lady Mage of Waterdeep drifted over to stand above him, frowning thoughtfully down. She blew him a kiss and slipped back to the passage wall like a silent shadow, vanishing through it a scant instant before the other bowman sat bolt upright, quivering in fear, and tried to tell himself that there'd been no gliding ghost in the cellar beyond the phantoms conjured by his imagination. It took him longer than usual to convince himself that everything was all right.

Laeral melted back out of the wall, murmured a word that made her solid again, and touched a dark, bare drow arm. Through the contact she said silently into Qilue's mind, *I know whose cellar this is. Auvrarn Labraster, recently risen to become one of Waterdeep's most "prominent" merchants.*

*He would be, of course, Qilue replied in the same silent, intimate way. Sister, I simply must get back to my own work. Serving two goddesses must be the hardest trail in all Faerun, I often think.*

*I don't doubt that. I'll take over from here,* Laeral replied, and kissed her sister with a tenderness that surprised them both. As they clung to each other in an embrace that neither of them wanted to end, taking simple pleasure in merely holding each other tight, the Lady Mage added, with a cold resolve that Qilue could feel through the places where their bare skin touched, *and I know just where to start.*

"My lady," her seneschal said with a grave flourish of his silver-handled rod of office, "you have a visitor."

Mrilla Malsander looked up from the latest installment of *The Silk Mask Saga* with barely concealed exasperation. Her servants seemed determined to interrupt her, time after time, in her one sacred, daily indulgence—reading a certain series of cheap, street corner chapbooks. The endless adventures of the amorous Lady Elradra, recently a slave and from birth (secretly) the Lost Princess of Cormyr, struggles in the salons and palaces of rich and sinister Sembian merchants to gain allies and the gold she needs to one day reclaim her kingdom. These melodramas were accompanied, in Mrilla's case, by warm sugared milk and pieces of expensive Shou ginger dipped in even more expensive Maztican chocolate.

She gave the seneschal her best glare, but his eyes were fixed firmly on the eagle Malsander crest that adorned the crown of her high-backed chair, and his stance and bearing were beyond reproach.

Gods blast the man down! She was theirs the rest of every day, until dusk took her out to the revels, but this one hour or so of every morning, as she raced through Elradra's latest exploits, sighed, then read the spiciest bits aloud to herself, savoring them with delicious shudders and thrills,

was hers, and hers alone. It was too much, by all the gods! It was just *too much!*

She would not hurry. No.

Mrilla set down the chapbook, discreetly purchased on a corner only hours before, and carefully concealed it beneath a grand copy of the Malsander family genealogy that was as thick as her thigh, and took all of her strength to lift. She sat back to study its appearance, nodded her satisfaction, then took up her milk and drained it in one long swallow, not caring if stablemen did such things in taverns she would never deign to visit. Wiping the mustache she knew was beginning to take firm hold of her upper lip, Mrilla set the plate of ginger pieces on the table that nestled half seen beneath the spreading arm of her chair. She slid it as far out of sight as possible, and snapped, "Well, Jalarn? This visitor is important enough to interrupt me at my reading, but not important enough to have a name?"

The seneschal told the carved eagle, "She gave her name as Lady Sylull Cassalanter, my lady. I conducted her into the Fleet, my lady, where she awaits your pleasure."

Mrilla Malsander's eyes opened wide, and her mouth dropped open even wider. Lady Cassalanter? *Lady Cassalanter?*

The Dame In White, known less respectfully as "the Dame with the Cane," was one of the oldest and most respected of Waterdhavian nobles. She was reclusive due to her failing bones and rigid standards of respectability. This was a woman who was said to regard unmarried ladies dancing at revels as doing something almost as sinful as the woman who, for a handful of coins, might take several partners at once up her bedchamber stairs in Dock Ward.

Not that Mrilla Malsander knew about such things!

Oh, no. . . .

Mrilla felt the warmth on her forehead and cheeks that she knew meant she was blushing crimson to the carefully shaven and powdered tip of her chin. The Fleet Parlor was

the best of her receiving rooms, crowded with gold and hung with large and colorful portraits of the ships that had enriched the Malsanders racing through stormy—but vividly sunlit—seas, but still. . . .

"Jalarn," she said icily, "we do *not* keep the heads of Waterdeep's noble families waiting in our parlors. Apologize deeply to her for the wait—abjectly, mind; none of your mockery!—and conduct her straight to me, here. Then you may withdraw, listening *not* behind the keyhole, but by the board at the doors, for me to summon you by means of the bell."

The seneschal bowed deeply—to the eagle carved at her father's orders rather than to her, Mrilla noted with fresh irritation—and withdrew. The moment the door closed behind him, she plunged into a whirlwind of throat clearing, nose picking, hair teasing, and straightening of throat lace and collar.

She'd safely settled herself back into her chair and assumed an easy, graceful smile by the time the door opened again. The seneschal struck its brass boom panel, and announced the guest.

Mrilla rose graciously. "Lady Cassalanter," she simpered. "So good of you to come. My humble home is unworthy to receive such grace."

The powdered, jowled figure in white silk blinked at her, nodded thanks and dismissal to the seneschal, and started forward, stooped over a cane that glittered from top to bottom with rare and precious gems from the farthest realms of Faerun. She bore down—slowly—on Mrilla Malsander, who found herself ensnared by piercing dark eyes divided by a nose as sharp and as hooked as a vulture's beak, but said not a word until the door boomed closed behind her.

Then she barked, "Malsander! I've words for you. *Sit!*"

Mrilla gaped at the woman.

The Lady Cassalanter lifted one white, bristling brow. "Sit *down*, woman! You look like an actress pretending to be

a noblewoman, dithering back and forth there. This is your house. Sit and be at ease."

"I—I—" There were few folk in Waterdeep who could claim to have witnessed Mrilla Malsander at a loss for words—and she was proud of that—but Lady Cassalanter could now claim to be one of them.

Mrilla backed wildly to the nearest chair and sat down on its edge, straining to keep bolt upright and to remember how best to pose her hands—crossed but not clasped, in her lap, yes, that was it—and her legs—crossed at the ankles? Left together with knees bent and toes turned to one side? Drawn back under her—no, that was for young girls. Oh, *gods!*

Lady Sylull Cassalanter marched right past Mrilla and seated herself in Mrilla's own high-backed chair; the one placed to dominate the room. She crossed wrinkled hands over the massive sculpted silver rose that surmounted her jeweled cane, parked its encrusted length upright between her knees, and leaned forward to bark, "Oh, you ape nobility very cleverly, girl, and don't think your ambitions haven't been noticed. 'Lady Malsander' is what you dream of—don't attempt to deny it!—and scheme toward; none too cleverly, I might add."

The gaze fixed upon Mrilla became severe, then softened. Its owner assumed a slightly less curt tone—a tone that someone who knew Sylull Cassalanter rather better than Mrilla did would have interpreted as "tenderness."

"You might be interested to know that some of us have admired your bold spirit, your hunger to become one of us, and your deftly underhanded business methods. We have almost taken the step of petitioning the lords to ennoble House Malsander." The aged noblewoman lowered her voice and added in a growl, "I say *almost*, girl."

"Ah—y-yes?" Mrilla replied intelligently.

"There are just three things standing in your way," the Dame In White explained gruffly. "The first and foremost is

your tightfistedness—gods, girl, you finally get someone noble into the house and you can't even stir yourself to offer even the tiniest glass of whatever wretched stuff you fondly believe to be 'high class' wine, or some of those chocolates you've tried to hide down there."

"Oh!" Mrilla cried, blushing bright crimson, "Ah—uh—*please*, help yourself. I'll ring for some wine. I—"

"Whatever bottle lurks in that hollow book you just glanced at will do just fine," Lady Cassalanter said in dry tones. "Don't fluster yourself, girl."

She watched Mrilla scurry to the bookshelf. Once her hostess had turned away to reach down the book, wrinkled noble hands moved in two small, deft gestures, and dry, patrician lips shaped two softly breathed words. Mrilla never noticed in her haste and breathless fumbling.

The book proved to contain both a flask and a pair of fluted tallglasses. When the pride of the Malsanders finally spun around with a glass of her best firewine trembling in her hand, the old lady had leaned back at ease in the eagle-crowned chair.

Reaching forth a hand for the proffered glass, she said, "The second thing is your clumsy campaign of unsubtle attempts to unmask and bribe as many lords as you can ensnare, girl. This is unutterably *common*. Cease at once—at *once*, do you hear me?"

The Dame In White held up her glass, surveyed its contents critically, and put it down untasted. "The proper way," she purred, "is to content yourself with just one lord and discreetly seduce him—as I did. Avoid crude jests, talking with your mouth full, and scratching yourself in his presence, and you're in—oh yes, except for the third thing."

She fell silent then, with disconcerting abruptness, and fixed Mrilla Malsander with such a piercing glare that Mrilla, for all her years, wealth, and airs, squirmed on her chair like a young miss in the nursery, still aghast at the thought of Lady Cassalanter so casually talking of seduction . . . and in

the end felt moved to fill the silence. "Yes," she asked earnestly, "this third thing? What might it be?"

"Consorting with undesirables," the Lady Cassalanter thundered. "Waterdeep, the eternal City of Splendors, cannot clasp to its bosom snakes who work to its downfall, or those who consort with them. Grasping merchants are quite bad enough, but this Labraster man is beyond even *our* legendary tolerance! Sever your relations—whatever they may be—with Auvrarn Labraster, forthwith."

Mrilla went white then, instead of crimson, and her eyes narrowed a trifle. "How—how did you—?"

"Gods, woman, do you walk Waterdeep in a daze? 'Tis a city of *people*, girl, people with eyes and ears and wits every bit as sharp as yours, even if they be dock loaders or stablemen or chamber servants. If you treat them as furniture, stepping around them without noticing, how can you help but be surprised when they murmur that you've been talking to a drow slaver one night—"

Mrilla stiffened, and her eyes glittered dangerously, but her noble guest seemed not to notice.

"—and an old fool of a noblewoman the next morning?"

The pride of the Malsanders gripped the arms of her chair so hard her knuckles started to go white. She swayed slightly as she licked dry lips and asked rather faintly, "The . . . the noble families of Waterdeep watch with whom I deal? And care?"

"No, no, girl. Don't give yourself airs or plunge into thinking that dark conspiracies rule this city. We watch only those who interest us—those we might marry, or ambitious, thrusting persons—such as yourself—who might soon win nobility and whom we therefore want to know better."

Lady Cassalanter leaned forward and added in a stage whisper, "I don't know how much you need the coins your dealings with this Labraster bring, nor do I care what you do for him or he does for himself. Truly, girl, do you not think that each and every noble family of this city doesn't get up

to a little of the shady stuff to please and enrich ourselves? But we're already in the club, don't you see? If you wish to join us, you'll need to put aside this Labraster man thoroughly enough to convince, say, the Lord Mage Blackstaff that you're done with him—and I do mean *convince* him after he's rummaged around in your mind with his spells, not just a letter you don't mean and a few empty words let fall from your lips. We don't care two copper coins about this, but we'll triumphantly use it against you if you don't jump when we demand this severance. So for you, 'tis simple: be noble, or work with this merchant. Once you are noble, you can work with him again—discreetly—and probably be of far more use to him. Of course, he'll have a hold over you, then, and that's a weakness a noble can ill afford."

Mrilla Malsander blinked, and the spell-disguised Laeral hardly needed the mind reading spell she'd cast to be certain of Mrilla's connection to Auvrarn Labraster. The spell did let her read enough of the dark, reptilian mind of the would-be noblewoman to tell her that Mrilla actually knew very little of the workings of the cabal Labraster and she herself were a part of. She knew little more, in fact, than that she must report to Auvrarn Labraster what Brelma or others using Brelma's name told her, that she must invest monies he gave her as he directed, keep safe documents and gems he handed to her, purchase things he directed her to purchase, and never, upon pain of death, to ask why.

The Lady Sylull Cassalanter rose with a muffled grunt of effort, steadied her stooped self over her cane, and rasped, "Just some friendly advice, dear. I think your determination and spirit would be good for Waterdeep. I'd like to see you as one of us. You'd be surprised how many nobles don't even want to be nobles—or at least, take on the tasks and responsibilities of nobility—and you want it so much. I look forward to your doing the right thing. A pleasant day to you, Goodwoman Malsander."



The stooped noblewoman proceeded a few laborious steps toward the door and added, without turning, "Nice paintings, by the way."

Mrilla half rose to gush her thanks and help her guest to the door, then, somehow, fell back in her chair, her mind a welter of images and sudden strong surges of feeling. She was ashamed at how thoroughly this wrinkled old woman had humiliated her, yet she was grateful to Lady Cassalanter for the frank, discreet advice. They wanted her to be a noble! She was aghast at how closely they'd watched her, and what they knew. Auvrarn Labraster came into her mind, speaking to her on a balcony at a revel overlooking the gardens of Brossfeather Towers. His image wavered away into the piercing eyes of Lady Cassalanter, talking to her just now, and they in turn became the barely concealed contempt in the eyes of her wooden-faced seneschal Jalarn. She was enraged that folk meaner and lesser than she had presumed to judge her. At the same time she was delighted that ennoblement was so close, and that nobles—some, at least—thought her worthy of exalted station.

Mrilla Malsander sank back limply in the chair, and began to drool onto its embroidered arm cushions. Laeral's gentle, magical clouding and rearrangement of her memories had, in a matter of moments, left Mrilla with an abiding fear and hatred of Auvrarn Labraster. She was also left with the need to cooperate with him fully, loyally, discreetly, and carefully—but slowly, always slowly. She was to delay and dawdle whenever and however possible. She had no more clear a memory of Lady Cassalanter than recollections of a pleasant, welcome-to-the-nobility social call, after which she'd drifted off to sleep so swiftly that she'd left untouched the glass she'd poured for herself after the stooped old lady with the splendidly jeweled cane had shuffled out the door. She also found herself thinking of Jalarn with sudden affection, even excitement, as she considered his strong shoulders, discretion, and the grace of

his long strides. She realized that the little signs he'd made, over these last few years, betrayed the depths of his affection and regard. . . .

"Ah, but you can be a cruel woman, Laeral," the Lady Mage of Waterdeep chided herself under her breath. She stepped out of a palace alcove and paused critically before a mirror across the hallway. The reflection showed her a fat, male, heavy-lidded merchant, his mustache bristling importantly above a doublet that was more gaudy than pleasant to look upon. So disguised, she strode away, boots clicking on the polished marble pave, and nodded an imperious greeting to the guards she swept past. They frowned, trying to remember the name of this merchant. They'd seen him around the palace a time or two. Since none of them had seen him emerge from the alcove that shuffling old Lady Cassalanter had entered, none of them thought there was anything unusual or amiss.

Auvrarn Labraster dwelt in rented lodgings in North Ward called Windpennant Pillars. The residence was a narrow townhouse in the midst of a row of shops that opened up to sprawl from room to room over all of the shops in its block. She suspected that it might also connect, through its cellars, to a large, grand mansion that stood behind it. For all his girth, the merchant with the bristling mustache strode with speed and purpose thence, frowning as if consumed with matters of great weight.

In truth, Laeral was thinking deeply as she strode along. Qilue had been right. They all had more important work to do than smashing a slaving ring. There'd been a time when the Lady Mage of Waterdeep would have delighted in a slow, subtle, painstaking investigation of Malsander, Labraster, and all their contacts and business associates. There was a time when the fascination of a good, juicy Waterdhavian intrigue, and understanding how a particular citizen dealt with another specific citizen behind closed doors, would have meant more to Laeral than smashing or frustrating this

cabal. Years had passed, though, changing Laeral as they changed everyone else, and she was too busy just now to devote more than a few hours of brute force tactics to the schemes of Auvrarn Labraster and his friends.

So it was time to confront the man, and peel his mind like an onion, or at least scare him enough that the cabal would react. The former task would no doubt be a bit more formidable than it had been with Mrilla. The latter she hoped, like flies disturbed from a corpse when a soldier rolls it over with his boot, might show the reach and strength of the conspiracy. All the while, she was grimly sure, one Khelben "Blackstaff" Arunsun would be diligently spying on her, no matter what he'd promised. Her present shape was one she'd used many times before. Khelben should have no difficulty in knowing whom Trennan Beldrusk the Waytrader—lately of Neverwinter; expert in silks, scents, and cleansing herbal scrubs—truly was.

When she stood before the door and used its knocker, Laeral had expected no reply. She was also unsurprised when her prudent step to one side did not cause her to evade a falling stone planter. Merchants crushed on one's doorstep was a little drastic for North Ward, but she was more than a little surprised to find the door unlocked. Ah, well. It wasn't as if traps had become a novelty these last few days.

"Labraster?" she called, gruffly. "Auvrarn Labraster?"

Her voice carried away through gloomy emptiness to distant, unseen corners. The house was dark, empty of life, and cold, but furnished and strewn with the oddments of everyday life. There was an ash-filled brass pipe bowl here, and an untidy pile of broadsheets there, as if everyone had just stepped out for a moment.

The fat merchant frowned, and ducked his head in through a few open doors, peering for signs of life or, perhaps, sprawled bodies.

"Labraster? Gods, man, I'm not a creditor or a tax collector! Where by the laughing fiends are you?"

The silence held, though somehow it sounded as if the house itself was awake; no longer empty, but alert and listening . . . waiting for something to happen.

Trennan Beldrusk called Labraster's name up the stairs, and for the benefit of anyone who might be hiding behind a wall panel, added gruffly, "I'll have to leave him a note. Gods, I don't want to be clawing my way through another man's house seeking quills and parchment. I'll check below, first. No one leaves just as trade season's getting into full swing without at least leaving agents behind. . . ."

She was halfway down the cellar stairs, behind the kitchens, when she heard the very faint sound she'd been waiting for. In the house above her, a door had been carefully opened, then closed again with care, by someone trying to keep as quiet as possible. She smiled, and went on down into the dimness.

The smell of damp earth grew strong around her, but there was no scurrying of rats—or any other sound, for that matter.

"Labraster?" she called, making her voice sound quiet but exasperated. "Where by all the watching gods have you gotten to?"

The house she'd seen thus far seemed like a series of reception rooms and offices. It was a place to entertain business clients, not the rooms where anyone really lived. Everything seemed too clean, too simply furnished, too unused. Nowhere had she seen any clothes—not so much as a rain cloak hanging on a peg. If the much sought after Auvrarn Labraster dwelt here at all, he lived in rooms she hadn't found yet. Here before her, behind the last of a row of wine casks and past a potato bin, was a heavy, iron-strapped door. Beside it a lantern hung on a wall hook. The door was in just the right place to connect with that mansion beyond Labraster's stables.

Laeral smiled, stopped to listen for a moment, and fancied she heard a stealthy movement somewhere in the kitchens above her. She waited, remaining absolutely still, but there came no more sounds. After a time she shrugged, threw back the door bar, and pulled the door open. Earthy darkness yawned before her.

The first trap should be about . . . *here*—where no client could have any honest reason for intrusion, and those "in the know" would have a way around it. Laeral made the way before her glow with gentle radiance, and saw a damp, dirt floored passage leading into a stone lined room that must underlie the stable yard. She took the lantern in her hand without bothering to light it, and stepped forward.

She was right about the trap.

At her third step the floor fell away, spilling her down into a musty cellar—a room where the air flashed amber at her arrival.

The radiance faded into a lazily curling yellow haze even before Laeral landed hard on bare stones, numbing her elbow, shattering the lantern, and driving the wind from her body. Struggling to breathe, she rolled over away from the spreading lamp oil, frowning. Her clothes were hanging from her arms like the folds of a fallen tent. Her magic should have lowered her gently into this cellar, preventing any fall.

Of course. Whatever enchantment she'd awakened—blundered into, fallen through—stripped away all magic. She was a mustachioed merchant named Trennan Beldrusk no longer, but herself, her garments now oversized and hanging loosely except at her wrists and ankles, where they ended a little too prematurely for the fashion conscious. She was but one tall, athletic woman with very little, now, to place between her and any subsequent traps ... or guards.

Oh, she had knives in both boots, another strapped to one forearm—and visible, now—and a fourth under her hair at the back of her neck, the black ribbon she wore at her throat concealing its sheath strap. She had a strong feeling

that little slivers of steel weren't going to avail her much against what lay ahead. She was the Lady Mage of Waterdeep, and she needed her spells.

Laeral sighed, sat up, and looked around. "I haven't *time* for this," she told herself aloud, not bothering to try sounding gruff any longer. "I've only time for brute force confrontations, remember?"

The yellow haze filled the cellar, but didn't seem to extend elsewhere. It wasn't swirling up into the passage above, still a-glow with her last magic, nor was it leaking into the only way she could see out of the room. A missing stone in the wall. Seemed to be the mouth of a crawl-tunnel running on toward the mansion.

Crawl-tunnel? For merchants and valuables being smuggled? No, there had to be another way, a proper way. Laeral looked up at the hole in the ceiling well beyond her reach, and sighed again. Doubtless it was up there somewhere, along with the pipe ashes and any stray human hairs and other leavings she should have scooped up to use in later spellcasting. This was rapidly becoming far more than a brute force job.

There was a soft, stealthy sound above her. Laeral peered hard, moving in a quick half circle to see the widest possible area of the passage above. She thought she saw a dark, shadowy shoulder and head jerk back out of her field of view, but she couldn't be sure. Whoever it was never reappeared. If the haze hadn't still clung to her, tingling as it drank at the glow enchantments on her daggers, she'd have used her spider climb to crawl the walls up and out of here, but she dared not waste it.

Dangerous or not, that crawl-tunnel was beginning to look attractive. Laeral sighed again, took off Trennan Beldrusk's gaudy over tunic, and dipped it in the puddle of lamp oil. The cuff of her right boot carried a flint and striker, as did the boots of many a merchant who smoked. It was the

work of a moment to give herself fire, which she hastily threw down the tunnel.

Pure fire could not harm her when she stood where magic could work. Igniting the cloth had set alight a little of the spilled oil. Laeral held her hand in the licking flames and felt the swift, sharp pain of burning. Pulling her hand back and rubbing scorched, frazzled hairs from her skin, the Lady Mage nodded. Fire could certainly harm her here.

Pulling her remaining clothes tightly around her and knotting them to keep them that way, she plunged hastily into the tunnel and crawled through the wisps of smoke to where her over tunic was blazing. With the same hand she took firm hold of it, watching the flames rage around her flesh and do it no harm.

Well and good. The magicslaying effect did not reach this far. Lying on her belly in the close darkness with her over tunic smoldering its last in front of her, Laeral cast an ironguard spell upon herself against falling spikes or jabbing guards' weapons. When its tingling passed through her, she got to her hands and knees and started to hurry. She really didn't have time for this.

On the other hand, if a trap caught her the right way or guardians overwhelmed her and snatched her life from her, she'd have all the slow, coldly unfolding time in Faerun for this little matter. In fact, it would consume her forever.

"Auvrarn Labraster," she told the darkness calmly, "I am no longer amused. Be warned."

Ahead of her, in the dimness—the only light came from the yellow haze now far behind her, and she wasn't yet quite angry enough to recklessly make *herself* glow like a torch to light her way—the crawl-tunnel turned a sharp corner to the right, and seemed to narrow as it did so.

"Well," she breathed, crawling on, "at least I don't have Dove's shoulders. It'd be no fun at t—"

One of her daggers, which she waved around the corner then thrust ahead, had awakened no reaction, so Laeral

followed it. Her swirling hair saved her.

She didn't see the blur of the serpent's strike, so never turned toward it, which might have cost her an eye. Instead, sharp fangs struck her cheek, plunging deep into the side of her mouth. Laeral got her other hand around in time to catch the viper before it could rear back to strike again. She held it, with its fangs thrust into her, while she hissed a spell that made flames snarl forth from her face.

It was like cooking sausages in a fire. She held the snake motionless through the sizzling and the reek, until only black ash fell away from her in crumbling flakes. By then, her vision was swimming and that side of her face was beginning to swell up to twice its normal size. She spat onto her hand, looked at the purple result, and grimaced. Purging with Mystra's fire was both messy and destructive, but she had little choice. If she kept on swelling, she might just get stuck here, wedged in this tunnel unable to even shudder, as the poison slowly slew her. "And," she announced wryly, her thickened tongue making her speech slurred, "I don't have time for that!"

Backing hastily down the tunnel, Laeral struggled out of her clothing and boots, stripping off even her knives and jewelry. The purging would destroy everything touching her skin and empty the poison—and a lot more—out of her every orifice. She might well need some of her gear again, soon. Besides, the sight of a nude Lady Mage of Waterdeep wasn't going to shock a slave trader.

The snake had come out of a pot, placed in the tunnel recently enough that it hadn't yet picked up the damp, dank smell of its surroundings. A little present, left just for her.

"Auvrarn," she told the darkness calmly, as the purging began its raging and sweat burst out of her in all directions, "did I mention my lack of amusement already?"

Nothing up or down the crawl-tunnel answered. Perhaps nothing dared.



A certain musty smell prickled in Laeral's nostrils as she reached the place where her tunnel emerged into a long, straw-strewn cellar. "Cat," she muttered. "A large one."

She emerged out of the tunnel cautiously, looking all around for the panther or whatever was going to spring at her, but could see nothing but a few bones and dung here and there among the straw. Oh, and an archway down the far end of the cellar, with torchlight beyond. This must be one of the mansion's cellars, she thought. There was the inevitable row of old wine-casks. Some of them stood well away from the wall. . . could the kitten be lurking behind them?

With a roar that deafened her, something plunged down from above, sharp claws raking fresh fire from her as she twisted desperately away. A ledge above the tunnel mouth. . .

Gods, was this whole jaunt going to be "old-traps-for-adventurers-time"?

Her latest foe was something large and striped that she'd once seen in the jungles of Chult. Its eyes were green and afire, its claws almost as long as its fangs as it landed, turned with sinuous grace, and stalked back toward her, circling softly sideways.

Laeral swallowed. Torn apart to bloody, gnawed ribs by a cat wasn't quite how she'd planned to end her days. Abed in Khelben's loving arms was a little closer to the mark. . . .

Ah. It didn't like the fire leaking from where it had clawed her. Victims were supposed to bleed, not blaze. Laeral gave it a tight smile and let the silver fire flow, willing it to rage up into real flames.

The cat snarled and circled away, and Laeral calmly readied a spell. There was a glade she knew, in the High Forest. . . .

Rumbling its anger and hunger, the cat turned back toward her again, tail lashing. The Lady Mage calmly took off the ribbons of her doublet. At least this beast had good

taste. She'd longed to tear the garment to shreds, too. She then removed the torn tunic beneath, balling them both up around her arm before she cast a bloodstain and sealed the silver fire away.

The cat lowered its head, stilled its tail, then sprang with another thunderous roar. Laeral charged to meet it, thrusting the ball of cloth at its jaws and slapping its striped head with her free hand.

The cellar was suddenly empty of jungle cats. Laeral smiled. It would be standing in the High Forest now, being rather baffled. She moved away from the tunnel mouth quickly, and looked up at the ledge. No more surprises?

Good. The Lady Mage of Waterdeep glanced down at her raw back and flank, made a face, and put the tunic back on. Not that it covered much of her right side any more.

She even stuffed the rag of her doublet through her belt. One never knew when a scrap of cloth might be needed, after all.

Ahead, beyond the arch, was torchlight. She fixed that as her next goal—if, of course, nothing else was lurking behind those barrels. Next time, Laeral promised herself, she'd simply march over to the mansion and hammer on its doors.

"Well, I may be an idiot, Labraster," she muttered, "but I can still be the nuisance that ruins you."

The torch in its bracket was of the "longburn" sort, almost as tall as a man and guaranteed for six hours. Someone had lit it not so long ago, yet there was certainly no one here now.

Laeral cast wary glances up and down the hall she stood in, wondering if the other cellars held hungry cats or similar surprises. She shrugged and turned toward the stairs. Perhaps in the pages of *The Silk Mask Saga* evil merchants might furnish every alcove with a trap, every passage with a spell, and every chamber with a waiting monster, but in real, everyday Waterdeep, waiting monsters had to be

captured, transported past city authorities well versed in many techniques of smuggling, confined in said rooms, and fed. Not to mention the fact that folk who paid taxes on houses in the City of Splendors, and paid much coin on top of that to heat said abodes in its cold winters, usually liked to *use* the rooms they lived in.

On the other hand, a perfectly good wine cellar—without a door to confine the beast, too—had been furnished with a man-eating cat. Just for her? If not, who was Auvrarn Labraster expecting? The silent stairs held no answer for her, and she went up them like a ghost in a hurry, moving with as much haste as stealth allowed. The floor above was all kitchens, pantries, and laundries, lit by high windows that opened out through the thick stone mansion walls at ground level. Some of the hearths were warm, but the fires had been raked out, no lamps or torches burned, and everything was deserted.

Somewhere on the floors above, a floorboard creaked. Laeral smiled tightly and went on. Labraster didn't seem eager for a face-to-face confrontation, but sooner or later she'd peer at his every secret here, or meet with someone who didn't have poisoned fangs or claws.

That hint of deeper danger she'd felt in the slave cellar was back. Merchants with beasts from the far reaches of Faerun, drow, haughty Waterdhavian society ladies, and the vipers who traded in Skullport didn't mix. There was too much going on here, too many disparate folk involved.

"Labraster," she murmured in little more than a whisper, "I think it's time I had some answers."

Another stair took her to the ground floor of the mansion where all was darkness and lofty ceilings. Shutters were closed here against the sunlight outside, and the gloom was deep as Laeral calmly walked through a high hall where no less than four curving staircases had their roots. She passed through an archway into a great, dark, stately cavern of a hall. The great hall of the mansion, this must be,

with a vast expanse of bare tiled floor on which to dance and hold revels, statues galore, and a balcony for a small host of minstrels to serenade from. Laeral spun around. Though she turned back again without pause, she hadn't failed to notice a swift movement in the high hall as someone ducked back behind one of the soaring staircases.

Humming to herself, the Lady Mage of Waterdeep stood in one spot and looked around at the silent statues and the gilded splendor of the great hall for a long time. Crossed broadswords here, tapestries bigger than peasant cottages there ... all very nice; impressive, but not gaudy. She surveyed the ornately carved balcony lip, and the railing above it. A little smile plucked at the corners of her mouth. She strode forward boldly, right across the open heart of the dancing floor where the tiles looked bright and new, until she felt a tile underfoot that seemed to tremble slightly.

Laeral spun around so abruptly, this time, that her own swirling hair didn't quite have time to get out of her way. She plunged three racing steps through it, back the way she'd come.

Right behind her, huge ceiling stones smashed down onto the new tiles with a booming impact that shook the entire mansion, sent dust swirling up into the air all around, and almost threw the Lady Mage from her feet.

Hah—finally, a trap more worthy of a Chosen of Mystra!

Laeral smiled at that thought, and her own foolishness in conceiving of it, and kept her gait smooth and her face calm as she slowed to her normal lilting walk, ignoring the shards of tile skittering across the floor in all directions, their clatter almost louder than the rattle of chains as the ceiling stones started their slow journey aloft . . . unbloodied. Laeral suspected that if she turned around to look, she'd see their hardened surfaces carved into smiling jester's faces, or something of the sort.

On the other hand, the dark figure standing in front of her was something of a cruelly smiling jester himself from

time to time, though that was probably not a description he'd enjoy hearing.

Caught out in the open, he made no move to dart behind cover this time, but shifted one hand to a pendant—probably some sort of magic—and the other to the hilt of a slender sword at his hip. Rings winked with brief magical fire on that hand, but Laeral's smile merely broadened a trifle.

"Elaith," she asked pleasantly, "are you merely amusing yourself here, awaiting your chance to rummage the broken body of a Chosen who's tasted one trap too many, or have you something to say to me? Something involving slaves, perhaps, or drow, or the merchant Labraster?"

Elaith Craulnobar's soft smile matched her own. The elf whom Waterdeep called the Serpent spread his empty hands with lazy grace.

"I mean no harm to the Lady Mage of Waterdeep," he announced in a voice that was almost a purr, "and must admit I began my walk in your wake purely for ... entertainment purposes. If it's Auvrarn Labraster you're seeking, I must tell you that my professional contacts have confirmed his arrival in Silverymoon last night." Laeral raised an eyebrow. "Truth?"

The Serpent spread his hands once more, in a mockery of a courtier's flourish. His easy smile broadened so much that it actually reached his wintry eyes—something Laeral had never seen before. "Lady, would I dare lie to *you*!"

"You'd lie to Mystra herself, Elaith," she replied. A smile was still on her lips, but her eyes were boring into his.

The Serpent took a smooth step back, his face falling into a half smile. "Naetheless, lady, I do speak truth," he replied gravely. "More than that, I can add just as honestly that Labraster and I do not have dealings with each other. Friendly, professional, or otherwise."

They stared at each other in measuring silence for a long moment before a trace of mockery rose to dance in the

elf's eyes. "May I add, Great Lady, that your lack of confidence wounds me?"

Laeral gave him a tight little smile and lifted a slender hand to point across the gloomy great hall at several spots along its balcony rail. Elaith's had not been the only stealthy movements she'd seen this last little while. "And these, wounded one? You just happened to bring a dozen men along when you went for a stroll this evening, I suppose?"

"My associates," Elaith replied smoothly, lifting his hand in a swift, intricate gesture. A signal.

Laeral turned to watch grim men and half-elves rise into view from behind the ornately carved railing, loaded hand crossbows held ready in their hands.

"Naturally they trailed after me, fearing for my health when consorting with so known and great a danger of the city as yourself, lady."

"Wise of them," Laeral replied sweetly, gliding forward with sudden speed to plant a kiss on Elaith's cheek that burned.

As the Serpent stiffened and staggered back, clapping a hand to his cheek, Laeral circled to keep him between her and the hand bows along the rail.

"Mind they keep those little darts clear of me as I go, Serpent," she said pleasantly, her voice raised to ring across the lofty hall like a trumpet. "Any pain I feel in the next hour or so, *you* will also feel."

She smiled almost merrily into elf eyes that glittered with swift anger, blew the Serpent a kiss, and strolled unmolested out of the hall.

Hurrying feet pounded down a balcony stair, and a man in leathers as dark as the Serpent's own came up to his master in haste. His low voice, when it came, was urgent with alarm.

"Sir?"

Elaith Craulnobar stood unmoving, still staring after Laeral. At his henchman's query he reached up to rub his

cheek once more. Peering, the man saw that it was puckered up in a fresh welt, a silver-hued burn shaped like the imprint of a lady's lips.

"I've got to get me some of that silver fire, Baeraden," the Serpent said softly, his fingers carefully tracing the burn now, rubbing at it no longer. "Even if it means serving a misguided mage-goddess."

The duty apprentice of Blackstaff Tower stared at the Lady Mage of Waterdeep as she strode past his station clad in the torn and tattered remnants of gaudy, ill fitting men's clothing, but wisely said nothing. Briion Dargrant said even less when Laeral turned back to his table, plucked up two specimen jars, and from various places about her ridiculous, and frankly revealing ruined garb produced a handful of odd hairs and another of what looked like pipe ash. She put each carefully in a jar and shut lids upon them firmly, then ordered crisply on her way past him to the passage again, "Touch those not."

Briion did, however, turn to stare as the lady of the tower tore off her gaudy rags until they lay pooled on the floor of the passage and she wore only boots, knives strapped to her in various places, and her long, unbound silver hair.

Looking back over her shoulder at him—the apprentice swallowed and hastily lifted his gaze from her rounded rear to her eyes—Laeral added, "Burn these rags ere I return."

She gave Briion a smile that he knew was going to bring him fitful sleep during the night ahead, and ducked through an apparently solid wall, into yet another secret passage he hadn't been told about.

The duty apprentice swallowed, shook his head, then scurried to pluck up the ruined clothing from the floor. Diligent obedience was a virtue, as the saying went. He shuddered to think of his fate if Khelben should pass by. Briion's eyes widened, not much later, as the brazier devoured the last of the rags and his nose told him that in

addition to the unmistakable musk of a jungle cat just like the one he'd shaped under Khelben's supervision less than a month ago, the clothing bore more than a trace of night viper poison. The study of venoms as spellcasting components was Briion Dargrant's proud specialty, and there could be no mistaking its distinctive, almost citrus scent. Just where had the Lady Mage been, and what had she been doing?

"Kissing serpents," came a soft voice from just behind him, and he stiffened in horror at the realization that he must have asked that question aloud—and that the Lady Laeral had returned and heard him. "But not the sort you're thinking of."

To that cryptic comment she added in a murmur, "I don't think we need mention your task, or my arrival just now, to anyone at all. Do you?"

Briion Dargrant swallowed with difficulty as the Lady Mage scooped up the specimen jars. She was resplendent now in a flowing, long sleeved gown but, his flickering eyes didn't fail to notice, she was barefoot. With a heroic effort he managed to say, his voice ridiculously solemn even in his own ears, "Lord Khelhen shall hear nothing from me, Great Lady."

The grin Laeral gave him then was both despairing and affectionate. Briion swallowed several times rapidly as she ducked through a spell-concealed archway—this one he did know of—taking the jars with her. He *was* going to have disturbed dreams tonight, by Azuth's Seven Mysteries, and that wasn't, he decided with a grin as he turned back to his scrying globes, going to necessarily be that bad at all.

The deepest spellcasting chamber of Blackstaff Tower was empty of all but old burn scars before a tight-lipped Laeral dragged in two stone pedestals from an antechamber. If Labraster was involved in dark dealings energetic enough to rouse the Serpent into spying on him—to the extent of invading his mansion with considerable armed strength—



but well hidden from the informants that kept Blackstaff Tower supplied with whispers of dastardly deeds afoot in the city, he was more than a smuggler or a slaver.

Much more.

Someone had been watching her, somehow, in the cellar and in Skullport. She knew that with certainty, though she hadn't even realized she'd sensed it until now, almost as if a spell had worn off.

A spell a Chosen of Mystra could miss feeling?

Frowning, the Lady Mage of Waterdeep said a rude word. She uttered it far more calmly than she felt. She hugged herself for a moment, running long fingers up and down her arms, then shook herself and began to move with brisk haste. Setting the hairs from the mansion on one pedestal and the pipe ash on the other, Laeral spread her fingers over them, and closed her eyes.

Brief radiance played about her fingertips, and two of the hairs wriggled away from the pile and drifted to the floor.

Laeral opened her eyes again. Everything that was left had come from, or been in intimate contact with, the same human male. If she was fortunate, a much more powerful spell could now use these discards to trace—and spy upon—the absent Auvrarn Labraster. If she was unlucky, they'd lead her to a servant, or perhaps some merchant who'd recently visited Windpennant Pillars,

Laeral frowned again. Why was a feeling of foreboding growing strong within her? One merchant, after all, with no known dark history of misdeeds or penchant for swaggering menacingly around the docks with a large force of hireswords in tow . . . why was she so uneasy?

"Mystra preserve," she murmured, and thrust aside dark thoughts.

Laeral looked into the antechamber to be sure no apprentice was going to come bustling in with a message in the midst of her casting, drew in a deep breath, and carefully cast her spell.

The scrying sphere that looks upon the spellcasting chambers flashed once, but thereafter remained dark. Briion Dargrant nodded calmly. The lady was conducting some sort of research with the oddments she'd brought back. He turned back to the writings Khelben had given him to go over, and did not look up until a scrying sphere burst with a flash and flame that hurled him and his stool over backward amid singing shards of glass.

Blinking amid the wreckage as loving tendrils of smoke flowed down over the edge of the table to envelop him, Briion did not have to clamber back up to know which globe had shattered.

"Oh, Great Lady!" he gasped. Tears started into his eyes, and he fainted.

Running feet almost trampled him a breath or two later. Apprentices poured down the passages and stairs of the tower, shrinking back against the walls as a black whirlwind snarled past them and plunged down into the depths.

They started to run again in Khelben's wake, feet thundering down stone steps and racing along the narrow ways to where bright light was raging in the depths. There they came to a halt and stood staring in sudden, panting astonishment, one by one. Astonishment . . . and growing fear.

The largest, deepest spellcasting chamber of the tower no longer had a door. Its arch stood empty, the door now a smear of dripping metal on the wall across the passage. Through the gaping opening, over the black and trembling statue of their master the Blackstaff, the staring apprentices could see that the chamber held leaping, clawing lightning amid scorched nothingness. A single ribbon of silver flame danced among them.

As the folk of the tower watched, the lightning became fitful, then slowly died away, leaving only the silver flame struggling alone in the darkness. Lord Khelben turned

around then to face the apprentices, his face like white marble, with two terrible flames as eyes.

"It would be best," he whispered with terrible gentleness, "if all of you went away. Speedily."

He turned slowly back to face the ruined chamber without another word. By the time the Lord Mage of Waterdeep faced the flame again, he was alone once more. As the old MageFair saying put it: "Apprentices moved by fear can move swiftly indeed."

Khelben drew in a deep, shuddering breath, and stepped grimly into the room where the flame danced ever more feebly, to shape a spell he thought he'd not have to use for years.

"Only someone of great power could have wrought such a spelltrap," he said grimly, as he stretched forth his hand to let what was left of his lady take the life-force she needed from him, to survive. "The last such I tasted was the work of Halaster the Crazed."

The silver flame coiled around his forearm almost affectionately, and the familiar voice he'd cheerfully die for, any day of any year, spoke in his mind.

*True, my lord, and this one feels like his work, too. He who spies on all in Skullport must have watched Qilue and this your favorite lady when we fared thence. Now shape me a body again, that I might speak to Alustriel without delay.*

"Some women," Khelben growled affectionately, his voice trembling on the edge of tears, "will do anything to get in some gossip."

## **Alustriel**

### **When a Good Man Loses his Head**

*There are some who hold that the High Lady of Silverymoon is a deluded dreamer, doomed to fail in her fair craftings because she thinks too highly of the good in folk, and too little of the evil that lurks always near at hand. I am not one of those.*

Reld Barunenail, Sage of the Histories  
from *The View from Secomber:  
Musings on the Years to Come*  
published circa the Year of Maidens

It was a very calming ceiling to stare at, and Alustriel of Silverymoon was staring at it now, lounging back in her chair to lose herself in the delicately painted panels and curving vaulting. Cracks gave the masterpiece character, like the cracks that afflicted and weakened the city she'd shaped. Her eyes followed the vault rib that plunged down in a smooth curve from ceiling to wall to become one of the two pillars framing the door. It was through that door that all urgent troubles came, sometimes jostling each other for attention, to shatter her moments of solitude here. Alustriel gave the door a wry look. It was closed now; trouble was overdue.

Sometimes she felt like a caged panther, prowling restlessly and endlessly along the bars that confined her. Outside this room was a palace, and around the palace stood the city some called the Gem of the North. Her Silverymoon, a walled refuge against the dangers of the wilderlands, and her cage for many a year. Just recently though, it seemed a larger cage beckoned her to let herself out into wider roaming, in a possible union of the Moonlands and the risen dwarf holds.

A folly, some said, but then, what folly is there in striving to bring a measure of security and happiness to even a tiny corner of Faerun? Even if it all ended in bloody failure, leaving behind only legends to echo down the years to come, the attempt would have been worth something in itself. Would be worth something, always, for a striving, however flawed, outstrips empty dreams and the sloth of not having tried to shape or create anything worthy at all. Yet would not the same argument be championed by a tyrant invading a realm he deems decadent, or any woodcutter carving asunder an elven grove?

"Alustriel," she told herself calmly, "you think too much."

She sometimes thought it was the endless leaping and weaving of her rushing thoughts that made her weary, and drove her to seek moments of silence, alone, like this. By the grace of Mystra she no longer needed to sleep, but the wits of every Chosen grew weary of grappling with problem after problem, and memorizing spell after spell; their power a constant roiling in the mind.

"Oh, dear me," she told herself aloud, stretching like a dancer to show full contempt for her own weariness. "Is the High Lady to be pitied, then? Does she want something purring and affectionate to cuddle, and a world without cares to do so in? Well, she'd better join the stampede—"

The air off to the left shimmered and became a floating, star shaped mirror—sweet Mystra, she'd set it off again!

" 'Cuddle,' " she told it severely, "was perhaps not the wisest trigger word to use."

Obediently, the mirror winked back to nothingness again, but not before it had captured and flung her own image back at her. She beheld a slender beauty of a woman whose emerald eyes were winking with amusement as she wrinkled her lips wryly, and guided the tresses of her long silver hair—moving seemingly by themselves—to smooth back the shoulders of her fine dark gown. Gracefully, of course; a certain sensuous grace, some termed it. She was not called "Our Lady of Dalliances" behind her back for nothing.

"Oh, have *done!*" Alustriel moaned to herself in amused despair. "Enough of teasing and preening and hot and avid eyes. You came here to be alone, idiot, not pose and imagine yourself slinking along in something that will be the height of fashion from now until perhaps . . . dusk. Think of what you have wrought, not whom you've touched."

The High Lady rolled her eyes, then let them wander again. They followed that plunging vault rib once more,

pausing at the arch of the still thankfully closed door. She'd not yet had any arms put up over that arch, despite the eagerness of the palace heralds. Realms were more than names and banners. They were folk thinking themselves part of a place, and she hadn't managed that, yet. This was still, first and foremost, Silverymoon, a haven in the wild and savage North.

There came a single knock upon the door—light, almost apologetic—then it swung open. She knew that knock, and permitted herself a mirthless smile, for just a moment before the man entering the room could see her face. Late for its cue but not unexpected, fresh trouble had come at last.

Taern Hornblade was Master Mage of the Spellguard of Silverymoon and Seneschal of the High Palace, but even the heralds had to think to recall those precise titles. To one and all in Silverymoon he was simply Thunderspell (or, less respectfully and at a safe distance, "Old Thunderspells"), Alustriel's faithful right hand and counselor. He was an astute if stodgy diplomat who ran with calm efficiency what passed for the Shadow Watch—what some southerly realms called "secret police"—of Silverymoon. The problems he brought to his beloved High Lady were never minor, and in recent years Alustriel, accustomed to conducting friendships and intimacies with many folk, had been surprised to realize just how much she'd come to love him.

And to know that it wasn't nearly as deeply and hopelessly as he loved her.

"My lady," Taern began, and turned away to clear his throat. Alustriel's one glance at his face, as it spun away, told her that this matter, whatever it was, was something bad.

"My lady, I bring grave news that requires, I fear, your immediate attention." Taern was too upset to reach for subtleties or delay his blunt message. "The envoy from Neverwinter, Tradelord Garthin Muirtree, lies dead within our

walls—murdered. He was, of course, our guest. His remains lie where they were found, in the Red Griffon Room."

"In the magic-dead area?" Alustriel asked calmly.

Taern nodded heavily. "I've seen them—him, My lady. He looks like a man I saw once on a hunt, torn apart by some great fanged and clawed beast. His head is entirely gone."

A wizards' duel in the wake of a MageFair created a "spell shadow" at a certain spot in the palace. This was a place where no magic worked. After a long consultation on her knees with the divine lady she served, Alustriel had deliberately maintained the shadow so as to give the folk of Silverymoon a way to readily strip away magical disguises, "hanging" spells, and other spell-traps or undesirable enchantments. To keep its use under control, she'd caused a chamber to be built around it, with secure walls pierced by no secret passage, message chute, or air vent.

When the work was done, the palace had two new, smaller rooms where a larger one had been. The one that held the shadow was a quiet, stately room of polished duskwood paneling. Its sole ornaments were a small company of carved, scarlet painted griffons crowning the posts of the chairs surrounding its polished meeting table. The griffons soon gave the chamber its name—and so it was to the Red Griffon Room that the High Lady of Silverymoon now hastened, with Taern striding anxiously at her side.

Their route seemed deserted—Taern's doing, no doubt. There was a stiffening in the air, and a rising, eerie sound as of many voices shouting wordless alarm. The sudden swirling up from nothingness of a cloud of sparks told Alustriel that her Seneschal had laid a powerful ward before the closed door of the Red Griffon Room.

She broke it, deliberately, before he could lift it, ignoring his reproachful look. She had to be sure—absolutely certain—that no hand besides his had been casting or altering wards while he was away fetching a silence-loving High Lady.

Alustriel strode to the door despite Taern's wordless protest. He could not, for all his years, have seen nearly as many horribly mutilated bodies as she had, in hers, and this was her city, and her castle. She fixed her mind on the most powerful slaying spell she had ready, and firmly swung the door inward.

The stuffiness—no vents, the only flow of air coming from a copper heat-turned fan suspended from a rod curving over the candle lamp that stood by the table—was familiar. The slaughterhouse smell, and the riven thing that had once been a man, now so thoroughly butchered that only one raised, clawlike hand and a hairy knee could still be recognized as human, was horribly, indecently unfamiliar.

Alustriel looked down at it expressionlessly. Nothing that dwelt in the palace could have torn apart flesh like this. It reeked of a challenge, a signal of defiance and warning from someone or something that wished to say: "See what I can do at will, High Lady? What is your power to me? If I can do this, so easily, how can you hope to defend the peace and safe haven your people look to you for?"



The seneschal made another anxious, motherly sound in his throat, and tried to step between her and the corpse. "Now, my lady," he protested, "there's no need for you to have to look upon this. I can whelm the Spellguard a—"

A slender arm barred Taern's way. He rebounded from its surprisingly immobile strength with a blink and a swallow.

"Taern," Alustriel said into his astonished face, "you've served me well for all these years. I thank you for it too seldom, so I'm thanking you now. I'm also telling you far more politely than I feel like being that you can serve me even better by taking yourself back the other side of that door *now*. Close it, and await without, patient and with thoughts of whelming the Spellguard or rousing the palace to scurrying alarm very far from your mind. Stray nowhere; I shall need your counsel very soon."

She was shepherding him to the door by now, almost driving him before her despite his red and worried face and anxiously flapping hands. "Lady, is this wise? Think you: we know not what has savaged this man so thorou—"

"Taern," Alustriel said severely, "I need to think and to feel . . . without you hovering."

Taern seemed to be on the verge of exploding. She wondered, for a flashing moment, if his oaths would impart any colorful expressions new to her. She hoped to keep from her face all trace of the mirth that thought awakened in her.

"I—I—lady, guard yourself!" her Master Mage almost roared, as her inexorable advance backed him to the door. "A hidden beast may be lurking, or a spelltrap left behind to strike at you. Danger can erupt from a gate or teleport focus in the space of but a passing breath."

He took a stand, as if he'd not be moved farther. With a serene smile she stepped into him, her bosom thrusting against his chest. Taern blinked, swallowed, backed hastily away, and lost the battle.

"Thunderspell, you're a dear," Alustriel told him with a sidelong smile, as she swung the door closed. "Please don't

be angry. I'll only be a little while."

The door settled into its frame, and she reached out with a fingertip to set her own magical seal upon it, but no familiar, momentary fire enshrouded them. Her eyes narrowed, and she spun around, willing radiance to burst from her entire body. The familiar tingling began, but no light burst forth. Magic within beings, magic that affected them but nothing of their surroundings, still functioned, but nothing else.

Holding her will to the task of making light, Alustriel strode quickly around the room, feeling the extent of the unseen shadow. Neither the corpse nor anything else stirred, beyond her own dark gown swirling around her hurrying feet. Not only was the magic-dead area intact, it had expanded—had *been* expanded, that is—some time ago, by someone with the power to make a spell shadow grow to encompass the entire chamber. The walls showed no sign of forcible entry or secret ways in or out, and the hollow griffon, after she unscrewed it from its chair post, was uncharred inside. The little flaming coin hidden there remained cool and unblackened, its enchantment in abeyance as before. The spell shadow hadn't been banished then replaced. It had remained in effect at the heart of the room since there had been a room, and griffon-topped chairs in it. Alustriel looked at the door. It didn't look changed either, and certainly not as if something large and long-clawed had ever torn it open. She swung it wide again, meeting Taern's anxious gaze, and said gently, "Master Mage, please come in. I've need of your wits now."

Taern opened his mouth to say something, remembered who he was speaking to, and closed it again without uttering a sound. His face darkened with embarrassment at the thought of what he'd meant to say.

"Oh, gods above, Taern, get in here," Alustriel murmured, taking hold of him by the shoulder and half plucking, half dragging him back through the door. "I met

Muirtree only twice, the first time years ago, and though I know why he was here in the Moon, I don't know why he was *here*, in the Griffon."

She closed the door again, firmly, and wondered why her mind had begun to stray to thoughts of food.

Taern licked his lips, carefully stepped around the carnage on the floor without looking down at it, and stopped behind a chair, resting the fingertips of his large hands lightly on its back. This was his lecturing pose. Ah, well, Alustriel thought, she needed what he knew, and his own way would be the best telling.

"Men who bear the title 'tradelord' are of course envoys for the city, or coster, or guild they represent," Taern began, as if explaining to a novice that what flowed in rivers was called "water." Alustriel kept her face patient, and even resisted a childish urge to mimic his voice and deliver the words she knew she could accurately predict along with him.

"In the case at hand," Taern continued, warming to his task, "Tradelord Muirtree, a far-traveled and well-liked man, was here in Silverymoon representing the interests of his native city of Neverwinter. We serve here as a meeting place and neutral safe trading haven for many in the North. Most official trade envoys do little more within our walls than meet, discuss trade to the point of drafting agreements, then depart, taking such treaties they've drafted, or ideas they've heard, back to their fellows or superiors. Goodman Garthin Muirtree was here to meet with many folk, but this was his first full day in our hospitality, and it seems he met, in this room, with five persons before being found . . . ah, as you see him now."

"Why this room," Alustriel asked, seating herself calmly at the table as if the twisted meat that had once been a man was a day's ride distant, and not within reach of her soft, pointed shoes, "and not those lower down that most prefer, with couches and decanter-laden sideboards and windows?"

"One man has been in the city this past tenday, waiting to meet with Muirtree, or at least he requested a tenday ago that we inform him of the tradelord's arrival, and arrange a moot at Muirtree's earliest possible convenience. That man asked that their encounter be in this chamber, and his request was brought to me. When I spoke with him—a man I've not seen in the Moon before, a Waterdhavian merchant, well spoken and prosperous, by the name of Auvrarn Labraster—he said he desired his meeting with Tradelord Muirtree to be in the 'magic-dead' room, for fear of 'a sneaking magic' he'd heard the tradelord was employing."

"You granted this request, installing the tradelord herein," Alustriel prompted, "then?"

"This Auvrarn was seen to meet with the tradelord, then depart. The tradelord remained in this room, as is usual given the papers and suchlike often involved in such meetings."

Alustriel looked pointedly around at the room, which was entirely empty of quills, parchments, ledgers, satchels, blotters, and such. Taern nodded ruefully, and continued, "Though none such documents have been found. In time, Muirtree met with envoys and a courtier before his ah, demise. All of them, by the way, came to this chamber alone, without scriveners or servants."

"Suggesting that they proposed to discuss matters of exceeding delicacy," the High Lady responded patiently, before Taern could explain the obvious. "Suppose," she added, lifting her hand in an almost beckoning gesture, "you make these latter folk known to me in the order in which they entered this room."

Taern shifted his feet, cleared his throat, and began. "Following shortly upon Labraster's departure came Goodman Draevin Flarwood, representing the newly formed Braeder Merchant Collective of Silverymoon—ah, a trading coster, lady."

Alustriel nodded, repressing an urge to murmur that she had heard of such things before. Seemingly heartened by this signal of comprehension, her seneschal nodded and continued.

"After Flarwood's fairly brief audience, we know from the door page stationed across the corridor—whom none of the visitors summoned, by the way—that Muirtree's next visitor was an old foe of his: the Tradelord of Luskan, Dauphran Alskyte."

"Everyone's old foe," Alustriel murmured. "Did they get to shouting loudly enough for the page to hear?"

"Ah, no, lady, though it seems their time together was rather lengthy. The page could, of course, tell nothing of Alskyte's temper by his manner upon departure."

"Of course," Alustriel agreed dryly. If icy disdain and bold rudeness are worn as a constant cloak, what can be told of the cloth hidden beneath?

"The next visitor was one of our own liaison officers, Janthasarde Ilbright. She came to check Muirtree's roster of meetings for the morrow, and has testified to me that he seemed hale and in good humor. He had no demands upon her nor appointments to add to the dozen local shopkeepers and crafters Garthin usually meets with, when here. He did not request a change of room or seem in any way out of sorts, and she did not stay with him long. A short time thereafter, Muirtree's last visitor was Oscalar Maerbree."

"I've met old Oscalar," Alustriel said in tones even more dry than before. "He tried to drink me under a table once, in hopes of joining me down there. Pretend I know nothing of him, and say on."

Taern shrugged. "Maerbree's a merchant whose family has always dealt in wines and spirits, though he's recently taken to importing herbal cordials, spiced cheeses, and the like. He was born in Neverwinter, and was sent here by his father. He's dwelt and traded in Silverymoon for the last twenty summers, and though now head of his house, he's

left his younger brothers to run the Neverwinter end of the family trading. His character you know ... as, I daresay, do half the ladies at court."

"Why, Taern Hornblade," Alustriel said mildly, "you're jealous. Here, in this palace and this city?"

"Bright Lady," Hornblade said stiffly, "I bow to your wisdom, and always have done. The permissiveness you encourage does much to blunt the violence of men—and women—long lawless and unfulfilled in the wilderlands. I have partaken, and admit to enjoying the spectacle from time to time. Yet it grates in my craw that a man so—so blusteringly crude should ... should ..."

"Sail so far, so often, and so successfully?" Alustriel said gently, to aid her flushed and stammering seneschal.

"Exactly, lady. I cannot think what women see in such grunting bear antics. To yield to them, it seems to me, cheapens any lady."

"And yet, think on this," the High Lady replied. "I've never heard of Oscalar being cruel to anyone, nor holding grudges or having time or taste for intrigue or deception. He is what he is, like a battering ram or a war mace."

"Precisely like a bludgeon," Thunderspell agreed. "I don't dislike or mistrust him—but he irritates me, forever bellowing and backslapping his way across room after room like a walrus who delights in embarrassing others. He irritates me beyond belief."

"So it's given you some small pleasure to question him rather sharply about the passing of Garthin Muirtree?" Alustriel asked softly.

Taern Hornblade blushed so violently that his face became almost black. "I—ah, yes, it has," he told the floor, and turned away from the table to pace restlessly across the back of the room. "Yet he denies everything, and, gods save and preserve me, I believe him."

"You've done very well, Seneschal," the High Lady of Silvermoon said formally, "and you can serve me best now

by bringing a glass of wine and a sausage rolled in frybread to me in the Chamber of the Hunting Horn. When I hand the empty glass back, Oscalar can be shown in. We'll talk in private."

"You want me to keep unseen at the back of the balcony, tending my truth field," Taern replied, not quite smiling. "Lady, all of my scrolls bearing that spell are piled ready in my chambers right now. You'd like this done without delay, before our suspects have time to hide things—such as, perhaps, themselves."

"And before my stomach begins to rumble so loudly that I can't hear their answers," Alustriel replied. She looked down then at the gory remains of Garthin Muirtree, and added slowly, "I can't think why I'm so hungry, given our guest here. Mind, he's not to be disturbed in any way, nor is my ward to be lifted from the doors when we leave. I'd like to speak to Muirtree's visitors in here, to unsettle them thoroughly, but there's a distinct lack of a balcony for you to hide on. Perhaps under the table?"

Taern winced. "Lady, the *body* is strewn half under the table."

Alustriel looked contrite. "I was joking, Taern, and rather badly." She rose and made for the door in a smooth, lilting movement, adding over her shoulder, "Douse that lamp, will you? The room is beginning to smell."

They were hurrying along a grand hall together, with Taern swiftly pouring out all else that touched on the matter into Alustriel's ear, when it happened.

"I've questioned only the five visitors, the door-page, and the two guards who served as honor escorts through the palace for Muirtree's visitors. All of them now know the tradelord is dead, and obviously that there's something suspicious about his passing, but no details—and I'm taking care that they're all guarded and held apart, prevented from discussing things even with their servants. We can't hold

them in such straits for long. The Luskanite has already begun to protest, and—"

The High Lady of Silverymoon broke her swift stride, almost stumbling, and put a hand on the seneschal's arm to steady herself. Taern turned to her in an instant, concern rising in his eyes as he saw her faraway look, slightly parted lips, and the shiver that passed through her.

"Lady? Is this some hostile spell? Should—"

Alustriel shook her head violently and leaned into his arms to slap two imperious fingers across his lips. Taern cradled his Bright Lady awkwardly but with infinite care as she inclined her head to listen to something within it that he could not hear. She lifted an intrigued eyebrow. A breath or two later Alustriel nestled against him as if for fatherly comfort, settled herself against his chest, then abruptly spun away from him to stand with hands on hips and a thoughtful frown dawning on her face.

"Well," Alustriel said aloud, eyes fixed on something that was distant indeed. "Well, well." Her eyes came back to the here and now, and snapped up to meet his. "Make sure the wine's Sharaerann amber. It need not be chilled."

She turned on her heel and strode away, swinging her arms with the determined cadence of a marching warrior on parade.

"Of course, Bright Lady," the man called Thunderspell almost whispered. "As you will, it shall be."

Taern stared after Alustriel's dwindling figure, watching the wide sleeves of her gown swirl. If she'd been ugly, or stupid, or simply lazy, he could have served her well and loyally, as the true ruler of Silverymoon, and known his worth. Why did she have to be more of a warrior than the best war captains the Moonlands could muster, more of a ruler than the wisest magisters of Waterdeep, and more of a mage than anyone he'd ever met?

And why, despite his own beloved family and hers, and many tests for them both down the passing years of crises at



court, had he fallen so utterly and thoroughly in love with her?

*Sister of Silverymoon, I have a need for aid, and you, for the safety of your city, a need to know. Hear me now?*

Of course, Laeral. I'm here; say on.

*You remember Mirt? Merchant contacts in Scornubel brought word to him of drow impersonating vanished human citizens there. He went to Dove, who met with misadventures in the Caravan City, and called on Qilue. She was nearly slain uncovering some slavers, and followed one of them to Waterdeep, and to me. The slaver, a drow we know as "Brella" reported to an ambitious woman you may have heard of: Mrilla Malsander. Mrilla works for a merchant who keeps far more out of the lamplight, here, a man by the name of Auvrarn Labraster.*

Surprisingly, the name is not unfamiliar to me, though I could not have said that before today.

*Ah, he's been trouble to you, now, too? It seems he, and a handful of drow who can cast spells with the best of us, are part of something larger. A dark fellowship whose reach, membership, and aims remain too mysterious for my liking. Their activities are alarming others, too. No less an upstanding Waterdhavian than the Serpent told me that Auvrarn Labraster arrived in your garden two nights ago. I tried to trace him, and was nearly destroyed for my troubles. Khelben thinks the spelltrap left waiting for me was the work of mad Halaster. Be on guard, Lustra! I need you to watch this Labraster, and for all our sakes find out more about his friends . . . but I need you alive, too.*

So do a steadily lengthening line of folk up here in the North who want me to advance this project, that law, or the other alliance for them. Have my warmest thanks for this warning, Lael—it's certainly thrown a fireball into the cooking caldron in front of me just now. A tradelord from Neverwinter has been bloodily murdered under my roof, and Auvrarn Labraster met with him not long before he died.

Taern's sizzling around like meat on a skillet, which is about what our victim looks like, all over my floor. I'm beginning to think I need me alive, too.

*We'll both work on that need, then. Keep me all-wise and all-knowing, mmm?*

Without fail. Fare thee better, Lael.

*By the Lady, you've been eavesdropping on Khelben again! Fare thee well, Lustra.*

"And this is?" Oscalar Maerbree refused to be cowed into obedience or even sullen acceptance, but strode along beside the seneschal like royalty being given a personal tour of the High Palace, ignoring the two fully armored guards who bore drawn swords a bare pace behind his back.

"The Chamber of the Hunting Horn," Taern Hornblade said shortly, setting his hand on an upswept, horn shaped doorknob and thrusting the door inward. "If you will, milord."

Oscalar inclined his head graciously, clasped his hands behind his back, and strolled inside, looking back over his shoulder for the first time at the stern, helmed armsmen in his wake. "A pleasant evening to you, good sirs. Mind you keep the hallway warm out there for my return."

Then, and only then, did he turn, whistling a little tune between his teeth, and let his eyes wander lazily around the room. A balcony thrust forward to tower over the room like the bow of a docked ship, its pillars and overhang ornately carved in sweeping curves and needles of dark wood, its upper works lost in darkness. Rich rugs were spread underfoot, tapestries and paintings—the inevitable elven hunts, one of them with swanmays taking wing from human form out of a forest pool, mounting into the air in alarm beside a flight of pegasi—hung on all sides, with doors surely behind some of them. There were lamps and hanging sconces in similar profusion, though none of them were lit. Above, a soft amber glow radiated from a lone hunting horn hung on a chain. A brighter, whiter light burned before him, at the elbow of a dark-gowned, barefoot woman reclining on

a lounge. The light was coming from a small rock crystal sphere at the tip of a plain, slender black staff that stood upright by itself, with no hand to hold it. There were chairs and tables in plenty, all dark and empty and silent. The only living presence was the woman. Her hands were empty, her unbound silver hair stirred about her shoulders, and her only adornment was a fine neck chain dipping down out of sight between her breasts. Her dark and thoughtful eyes were two hard dagger points upon his.

"Gods, woman!" Oscalar roared, slapping at his thighs so as to set the little bells dangling from his bright and stylish new codpiece chiming. "If you wanted me, all you had to do was send a page—or come yourself. You'll never need to bring more than a flask of wine and a smile. You didn't have to make two idiots dress up in battle steel and clank across half the palace—or awaken Thunderguts here, either."

Without waiting for a reply from the High Lady of Silverymoon, the large, fat wine merchant turned and pointed imperiously at the open door. "You may leave us, mage!"

Taern was looking at the lady on the lounge, and continued to do so. She shifted her eyes to his, and nodded almost imperceptibly. The seneschal bowed his head, turned with slow grandeur and not a glance at the merchant, and strode out, drawing the door closed as he went.

He left a little silence in his wake, and Oscalar and Alustriel peered through it at each other for a moment or two before the merchant asked more quietly, "This isn't about pleasure, is it, Bright Lady?"

"You're more than usually perceptive, Lion of the North," Alustriel replied calmly. "Or is it 'Sword of Silverymoon' these days?"

The wine merchant ducked his head down between his shoulders like a gull standing in an icy wind, "Hah-*hem*, lady, I know not. Have I offended anyone important with my

... attentions? Or is there something else you'd like to talk about?"

"There is," Alustriel said, a note of doom in her quiet voice. "I'd like to talk about death."

There was a little silence, and the room seemed to grow slightly darker. Oscalar Maerbree stared over the chairs and tables between them, squinting slightly to make clear contact with the eyes of the lady on the lounge.

"I'm sorry, Lady Alustriel," he said in disbelief, "but did you say—'death'?"

"*Death*, merchant . . . but not the death that will surely be yours if you don't take both of your enchanted daggers out of their sheaths—slowly—and lay them on that table to your right," Alustriel replied almost tenderly. "Another death."

She let silence fall again, sitting like a statue as Oscalar Maerbree met her eyes uncertainly, fumbled with his large, many-horned belt buckle as if finding nervous comfort in stroking something so reassuringly large and solid, then drew out a long, needle-thin knife from behind it, and a more stout blade from one boot. He hefted them for a moment, eyes measuring hers thoughtfully, then set the two weapons carefully on the indicated table, took two slow and deliberate steps away from it, and said, "Right—what's this about, then?"

"Please sit down, Oscalar. Here."

One of Alustriel's long arms rose to point at a chair only a stride or two away from the lounge, the sleeve of her gown rippling. The merchant's eyes narrowed, then he threaded his way through the idle furniture to the chair with a few quick strides, snatched it up with a grunt and sudden flexing of corded forearms, and carried it four paces to one side.

"Your servant, Lady," he almost snarled, sitting down heavily. "Now, what by all the gods is this about? I was hoping to catch a kiss or two before morn—"

"You still might, merchant, if you give the right answers swiftly and clearly."

"And which, Lady, might the right answers be?"

"The truth, Oscalar." The eyes locked on his were two flames of promised fury. "For once. Put away your codpiece, give me simple answers, and this will all end for you."

The merchant winced at the waiting rage in Alustriel's gaze, and swallowed, unable to drag his eyes away from hers. Gods, but it was hot in the darkened room. "Right," he said curtly. "Ask your questions."

"Was Tradelord Muirtree of Neverwinter alive when you left him?" Alustriel snapped, right on the heels of the merchant's words. He stared at her, brows drawing together in a frown. "Well?"

"Lady," he said slowly, "I never met with the tradelord."

"You neither saw nor spoke to Garthin Muirtree this day?"

"No. I'd hoped to—we had a moot planned, here in the palace—but a page brought me a note from him, begging off."

"Where is that note?"

The fat merchant spread helpless hands. "Gone. I burned it in the grate in my room the moment I'd read it—my habit for everything but contracts and treaties."

Alustriel raised a mocking eyebrow, but the merchant growled at her look and said, "Truth." His jaws snapped out the word as if he were slamming a castle door.

"What did the note say?"

"The words are gone, lady—but 'twas an apology, signed by him, saying he'd have to miss 'our planned parley'... that's how he put it. Said he'd been taken ill, and it would be his pleasure to send the same page to me early on the morrow to arrange another moot."

"So you'd know this page boy if you saw him again?"

"I would." The merchant sat back in his chair more calmly, his eyes fixed on Alustriel's. In the silence between

them, there came a muffled sound from somewhere near, as of a door closing. Oscalar Maerbree lifted his head for a moment, then asked, "Someone's killed the tradelord? How?"

"I don't yet know that," Alustriel said carefully, "and might not tell you if I did. Would you like a drink, Oscalar?"

The merchant regarded her expressionlessly for the space of a long breath, then said, "No. I don't believe I would, given the circumstances."

"And why is that?" the High Lady asked, her voice silken soft.

The fat merchant lifted one large, blunt-fingered hand, stared at his palm for a moment, then told it, "I'd like to make my own death as difficult an achievement as possible."

The door Oscalar had come in by opened without warning, and the burly merchant's head whipped around, a dagger coming into his hand with dizzying speed.

The two guards coming through the door saw the flash of the blade and went for their own swords. Steel sang swiftly, but Alustriel came to her feet even faster. "That won't be necessary. Weapons away."

In the silence that followed her ringing shout, the table one guard had thrust aside to charge the merchant slowly continued its topple over onto its side, landing with a crash.

The two guards stared at Alustriel, and what she was doing. Oscalar was also looking down in disbelief at the slender hand encircling his thick and hairy wrist, its grip as hard and firm as a manacle. He tried to wrench free, but he might as well have been struggling against a stone wall. He could not move his hand, even with a sudden wrench. Staring up at her face, the merchant tried a sudden jerk that had all of his weight behind it. The chair rocked under him, but his hand was held in one place as if frozen there.

Alustriel gave him a gentle smile. "Let go of the knife, Oscalar," she said, in a mother's chiding tones.

A slow, dark flush crept across the merchant's face, but he opened his fingers and let the blade fall.

Alustriel let go of his wrist, picked up the dagger heedless of his proximity to her bending body, and inspected it.

"You *do* know sleep-salarn—as a poison—is unlawful in Silverymoon, don't you?" she said.

Oscalar shrugged, and Alustriel calmly handed him back the dagger. "Put it away," she said, "and mind the salarn is cleaned from it by evenfeast tomorrow."

The merchant gaped up at her. Alustriel gave him a tight smile and turned to address the two armsmen, who were busy erasing clear astonishment from their faces. She remained standing beside Oscalar, within his easy striking distance, as she asked crisply, "Did you conduct this man to the Red Griffon Room earlier this day, to meet with the tradelord from Neverwinter?"

Both of the guards gave Oscalar level looks, and both replied, "Yes, High Lady."

"And conducted him back to his chambers, after?"

"To Glasgirt's Hall, lady," one armsman replied.

"He asked us to take him nigh the kitchens, for an early meal," the other replied.

"And after, you went—?"

"Back to our posts, outside Barsimber's Arch."

"And this man came not past you again, while you were stationed there?"

"No, Great Lady."

"My thanks, good sirs. Return to your duties, and send in the boy you brought hence."

The guards gave Oscalar dubious looks, laid their hands on the hilts of their sheathed swords in duplicate silent warnings, and did as they were told.

The boy was trembling with awe and terror, but Alustriel gave him a smile and asked gently, "Have you seen this gentleman before?"

"M-many times, Bright Lady. Usually coming out of bedchambers or revels. He's very loud."

Alustriel's merry laugh startled both merchant and page, but she let it fall into another smooth, grave question. "When was the last time you saw him?"

"With the guards, leaving the Red Griffon Room, this day."

"You saw the guards bring him there, before that?"

"Yes."

"You're sure it's this man, and no one else?"

"Yes."

Oscalar seemed about to say something, but Alustriel turned her head and gave him a look that had a dozen daggers in it, and he held silent. She turned back to the page, the long sleeves of her gown swirling.

"Did anyone else enter that room before the Lord Taern?"

"Yes. The steward Rorild; he came out shouting, and Old Thunderspells came. Uh—that is—uh—"

"Old Thunderspells is a splendid name," Alustriel said soothingly, "that I'd be proud to bear myself. Just one question more, now. Did you take a note to this man sitting beside me?"

"No, lady."

"You have my thanks. Go now to the kitchens, and tell them my orders are to let you eat whatever you like, and drink a glass of the finest wine they have ready, and you are off duty tomorrow to recover from your gluttony unless the Lord Old Thunderspells or I send for you."

The page boy's eyes grew as large and round as saucers, and he stammered his thanks and practically sprinted out the door, leaving it open.

Alustriel went to close it, then turned and came back to the merchant.

"Well, Oscalar?" she asked coolly. "What am I to do with you? Or were all those folk lying?"



"I know not," the fat merchant said heavily. "I can only say that I did not slay Muirtree, have never acted against him—and never even went near the tradelord this day."

"Because of a note that boy says he never took to you?" Contempt dripped from Alustriel's tone.

"That was not the boy who brought me the note!" Oscalar roared. "Gods, woman, has your precious palace no other pages?"

Alustriel stared at him for a moment, then went to a wall and pulled a dark cord hanging there. After a moment the door opened again, and a steward came in and bowed. "Great Lady?"

"Summon to me here all of our pages save young Pheldren," Alustriel commanded. "Right now, asleep or awake, on duty or off, sick or well—no exceptions. If they're sick abed dying, bring them priest, bed, and all. I want everyone, in haste."

The steward assured her it would be done, speedily turned, and with wide eyes raced away. Alustriel left the door open this time, and turned back to the merchant with the barest trace of a smile on her lips. "Are you *sure* you won't have that drink, Oscalar?"

The wine merchant shrank back in his seat. "Keep away from me, Alustriel," he snapped. "You're up to something . . ."

"Oh, put that dagger away, Oscalar," she said wearily. "Here you are alone with the one woman in the High Palace you haven't yet boasted of bedding, with the avowed aim of getting 'a kiss or two' before slumber this even, and instead of trying your charm—lumbering though it may be—you're drawing knives on her. All this though she rules the city around you—the city you dwell and grow rich in. I ask you, Oscalar, is this wise? Is this . . . good business? Is this in keeping with your manly reputation?"

"Lady, I—" Oscalar's white face was now beginning to go purple, and he was trembling. "I—I—oh, gods, shut *up*,

woman, they're starting to arrive."

As page boys flooded into the room, one of the foremost fixed the merchant in the chair with a cold, level gaze and said, "For the rudeness you have just offered our High Lady, I challenge thee, man. Have you a dagger?"

Oscalar Maerbree opened his mouth like a fish gobbling out bubbles, but no sound came out.

Alustriel watched him for a moment, then said to the page, "As a matter of fact, Eirgel, he does ... but I forbid challenges in this room, and at this time. I shall, however, remember your honor in championing me with pride. Have my gratitude."

Eirgel drew himself up with shining eyes, saluted her with the dagger he'd whipped out, and put it away. By then the space between him and the doors was crowded with excited boys. The steward came into view around the edge of the door behind them, half carrying a sleeping boy. "Here we muster all, Great Lady."

"My thanks, Rorild, and to all of you for prompt obedience. This won't take long." Alustriel turned to the merchant and said, "Stand up, Oscalar, and point out to me the page who brought you the note."

The merchant looked at her with a sort of sick dread on his face, and got up slowly, staring around almost helplessly at the sea of boys. Out of their midst a hand shot up, and an eager voice piped, "If you please, Lady Alustriel, 'twas I."

Alustriel turned to Oscalar. "Well?"

The merchant was almost gasping with relief. "Yes—yes! This is the boy."

Silver hair swirling around her shoulders as if it had a life of her own—there was a murmur of excitement among the pages—Alustriel turned to the page and asked, "Who gave you that note, Kulden?"

"I—ah, no one, lady. 'Twas left on my delivery tray, so I delivered it."

"Thank you, all of you. You've just done Silverymoon good service indeed. Back to your duties or leisure, now, all of you—save you, Kulden."

When the shouting was done and the room empty again, Alustriel made sure the fat merchant and the excited page had not been mistaken with each other. She sent Kulden off to the kitchens then to find Pheldren and demand the same treatment as his colleague was enjoying. "If you hurry, merchant," she said to Oscalar, "you may yet find those kisses. Take your daggers with you."

Oscalar Maerbree gave her a wild look, but remained where he was. A slow smile grew on Alustriel's face, and she reached down an arm to help haul him to his feet. The merchant looked at her hand for a moment as if it was the head of a snake that might bite him, then took it, and found himself on his feet with his nose an inch or two from that of the High Lady of Silverymoon. He reeled hastily away, breathing heavily.

"Have done with mocking me," he snarled, heading for his knives.

He was snatching them both up from the table when two slender arms went around him from behind, and a cool voice said in his ear, "I don't mock you, Oscalar, and I won't. I wronged you, thinking you a liar. You told me the truth, and to me—or any ruler—that's worth more than a year of fawning and florid compliments. Here."

Oscalar Maerbree turned around with the daggers raised before him like a defensive wall. Alustriel stretched her perfect white throat between them and planted a gentle kiss on his cheek.

Oscalar blinked at her. He did not resist when she pushed the daggers aside and put her lips firmly on his.

He was struggling for air when their battle of tongues ended and Alustriel gently pushed him away, laughing, and said, "Behold your kisses, Sword of Silverymoon. Now get

out of here, and put those daggers away before I have two murders to investigate."

The wine merchant looked at her with astonishment ruling his face. He tried to speak several times before he managed to ask, "Why?"

Alustriel put a hand on one hip and struck a smoldering pose of promise against the doorframe. "I know you, merchant. You're going to roll down the hall and out into my city bursting to tell someone about this night. You can't help not flapping your jaws, so I want you to tell all the Moon about kissing me, and not a word about Tradelord Muirtree or murder or you being suspected of it. Do you understand me?"

Oscalar swallowed at the dark fires that were now back in her eyes, and stammered, "Y-yes, High Lady." He went to one knee, almost falling over, and said in a rush, "You can depend on me, lady! Truly! I-I—"

"I know I can. Call me Alustriel," the ruler of Silverymoon said almost affectionately, taking firm hold of the merchant's ears and hauling him to his feet as if he was made of feathers. Tears started into his eyes from the pain of that handling, as he gaped again at her strength, and she grinned at him like the sister of his youth had once done, and added, "Ah, dripping daggers, man. Have three."

When her lips came down on his this time, Oscalar Maerbree closed his eyes and steadied himself, daring to reach out and gently hold her shoulders. He very much—and forever—wanted to remember this.

"There goes one man who will love savagely tonight, then go to bed alone and lie awake thinking of you," Taern Hornblade said gravely.

Alustriel's head snapped around. Had those words held more than just a hint of wistfulness?

"Am I too hard on you, most loyal of men?" she asked softly, lifting a hand toward one side of his face.

Taern shuddered, and put up a firm hand to capture her fingers. "Lady, don't. Please don't. It's hard enough."

They regarded each other thoughtfully for a moment, then Alustriel bowed her head and said, "Forgive me, Taern." She brought his hand, by means of the fingers he still held, back up between their faces, and added, "This wisdom of yours is why you will rule this city someday."

"Lady, *please* don't speak of such things. All I can think of when you say that is your . . ."

"My death?" At his silent nod, Alustriel shrugged. "It will come, one day, and find me. We can none of us hide from it, and I've had far longer a run than most." Her face changed. "Someone helped it find Garthin Muirtree earlier than it should have, however, and I know from your signal that lusty old Oscalar was telling me the simple truth."

"Lady," Taern told her gravely, "they were all telling the truth—both guards, both pages, and the merchant—or believed they were."

"So where does that leave us?"

"Either someone did a lot of spellwork to twist and tamper with a lot of minds—very quickly, and with no traces that I noticed—or someone deceived their eyes, far more simply, earlier this day."

"Someone wearing a spell-spun likeness of Oscalar met with Garthin, and murdered him," Alustriel murmured.

Taern nodded. "Indeed. Which of the others will you question first?"

The High Lady of Silverymoon smiled thinly. "Flarwood. Then the exalted Tradelord of Luskan, followed by Janthasarde to give us some time to recover from the Luskanite ... and Labraster last. Cast a fresh truth field before we begin, and have whoever of the Spellguard is up on the balcony with you hand me down your wineskin for a swallow, before anything else."

"Wineskin, lady?"

"Truth, Taern. Simple truth, remember?"

The Seneschal of the High Palace flushed and asked, "The red wine or the white, lady?"

"*Alustriel*, Taern. To you it is Alustriel, or Lustra. White, damn you."

"Shining Lady, I'm flattered indeed that you've asked to see me this day!" Goodman Draevin Flarwood's bow was so low that he almost knelt. "I'm proud that the Braeder Merchant Collective has caught your eye, amid all the shining successes your rule of justice and peace has made possible."

"Well," Alustriel said in dry tones, "I like to be overwhelmed."

"Silverymoon is a great city," the merchant said excitedly. "Perhaps the greatest city. I grew up here scarcely appreciating all you've wrought until I traveled the face of Faerun trading, and saw what holds sway elsewhere. There's just one thing, Shining Lady, that puzzles me."

"And what might that be?"

"With all this prosperity and love of learning, the Moon's long ties with Everlund, and our growing friendship with like-minded cities of the North, why, High Lady, have you avoided building an army and border castles? *Why* is your Spellguard not an able force for justice and hunting miscreants, like the War Wizards Cormyr boasts?"

Alustriel stretched a little on the lounge, and gestured to him. "Please be seated, Goodman. Here."

As Flarwood scrambled to obey with the eagerness of a puppy, the ruler of Silverymoon added, "The things you've mentioned are the trappings of war, not the anchors of a realm. I bend my efforts these days to make the folk of the Moonlands feel as if they belong to a kingdom, sharing a realm that is theirs—so in time to come they'll govern themselves, looking to no throne or lineage."

"But that will take years!" Flarwood protested, leaning forward in his excitement. "Our children's children will be old before we see this."

Alustriel leaned forward until her face was close to his and he was looking straight into her eyes. As her long silver hair stirred restlessly about her shoulders she asked gently, "Ah, yes, you've said it perfectly, Goodman. For our children's children. Have you ever heard of a better reason to do anything?"

Draevin Flarwood blinked a little, and she kept silent to give his thoughts some time to spin to a conclusion. She hoped they knew how.

When he stirred to speak again, the word she'd expected was the first to leave his lips. "But—"

She held up a stern hand and said gravely, "Goodman Flarwood, it will some day give me great pleasure to debate and discuss the future of the Moonlands, but I know not yet if I'll have that discussion with you—or if you will be dead."

Draevin Flarwood blinked for the second time in the same day—possibly a record—then managed to gasp, "Uh . . . pardon, lady?"

"Draevin," she said gently, "you met with Tradelord Muirtree earlier this day, did you not?"

"Why, yes, and it was a good meeting, very positive for trade. We—uh—that is, I can't discuss what we agreed upon, though of course if you insist, I'll h—"

"Did you strike Garthin Muirtree with your sword, Draevin?"

All the color spilled out of Draevin Flarwood's face, leaving it the hue of old bone, and he gasped, "What?"

"Did you take a weapon to Tradelord Muirtree?"

"N-no, of course not, Lady Alustriel. He and I are *friends*. I—"

"Do you know of anyone else desiring to harm the tradelord, or doing so?"

"No," the merchant replied emphatically, frowning, "but, lady, why do you ask me? Don't you know who hurt Garthin?"

"And how should I?"

"Well, doesn't your magic reveal who, the moment you bend your will to ask whom it might be?" When Alustriel silently shook her head, Draevin Flarwood looked almost as if he might cry. "But you hold the power of Mystra in your hands!"

"In this, good sir," Alustriel replied quietly, "I hold but moonlight in my hands."

As she looked into the young merchant's gaping face, memory changed it to that of an even younger man, staring and drooling after he'd spent much of a day screaming under the coldly patient fingertips of the Lord Mage of Waterdeep. Khelben had ruthlessly taken apart that man's mind to find the secrets he needed to know to defend Waterdeep against but a dozen smugglers. "For the good of the city," had been the Blackstaff's justification, and she saw again his grim face as he told her those words.

That grim face changed again, into a younger, laughing one with a hawklike nose and the beginnings of a beard. Elminster, rearing her and her sisters with warm, humor-laced kindness so long ago. The easygoing yet unfailing love that had forged her—forged them all, down the years—led her to her own dignity-to-the-winds rule in Silverymoon, here and now. In the Gem of the North men and women were free to be heroes and fools, and encouraged to love openly. They were all held to be equal, man and woman, elf and dwarf, halfling and human, until they personally proved themselves otherwise.

Alustriel drew in a deep breath. She could mind-compel Draevin Flarwood or any man, reading his every private thought and recollection, but only at the cost of much time, and burning away many memories—and his will to think, and brilliance in doing so—from his brain. She would not do that, this day. She would never do that. "Never," she hissed.

"Uh-ah . . . Great Lady?"

Alustriel returned to the here and now with a shiver that shocked the young merchant into speechlessness.



"You have our leave to depart, Goodman Flarwood," Alustriel told him gently "Say nothing of this to anyone."

Silently Draevin Flarwood nodded, knelt to her with his hands folded as if in prayer, and backed toward the door, still on his knees. As she winced and leaned forward to bid him rise, he found his voice again and asked beseechingly, "Tell me but one thing if you would, O Shining Lady. Tradelord Muirtree; will he recover?"

Alustriel swallowed. "No," she said gently. "No, I don't think so."

"Tradelords of Luskan," Dauphran Alskyte said coldly, "are not accustomed to being summoned to private audiences with unescorted women, and there accused of murder. In case you've not noticed, Great Lady, I am a tradelord of Luskan."

"The fact has not escaped our discernment, most charming sir," Alustriel purred, feeling Taern's silent growl of anger from the balcony above. It made her own irritation more easily turn into amusement. "Will you take wine?"

The Luskanite barked out a short and mirthless laugh. "I thank you, but no. A considerably more foolish man than the one you see standing before you would know better than to partake of what may be drugged—so he might thereafter awaken in the throes of execution for any number of falsified crimes, to the great cost—and displeasure—of my masters in Luskan."

Alustriel shrugged. "You may well be more familiar with drugs and deceit, most wise sir, than myself. . . or any who can command spells to achieve their ends."

The door behind the Luskanite opened then. Taern showed himself just long enough to make the clear, unmistakable gesture that meant some magical defense or other carried by the waspish tradelord was blocking his truth reading, then disappeared again.

Dauphran Alskyte showed how closely he was watching Alustriel's eyes by whirling around, in time to see the door

close. He whirled at once back to face Alustriel again.

"It seems, Lady," he said icily, "that you are rather less a stranger to deceit than you claim to be ... unless that was a sophisticated Silverymoon method of bringing us fresh air, perhaps? Or something else you'd care to enlighten me about?"

The High Lady of Silverymoon regarded her unwilling guest through half closed eyes, calling on the ability to feel magic that Mystra imparts to all of her Chosen. Taern's truth field briefly revealed itself as a shining net laid over the chamber. Against it stood a small, dark shroud, enveloping the Luskanite and centered at his throat. Alustriel opened her eyes again. There; that amulet.

"No," she said coldly, "I would not care to enlighten you."

Given time enough, she could infiltrate the amulet's enchantment, drifting past its defenses without shattering or altering the magic, then mind-read Alskyte to confirm when he spoke the truth. A simple detection of falsehood would do his wits no harm, so long as she didn't try to force him to think of specific things—to hunt down the memories she needed to see. Goading words could, of course, turn his thoughts just as surely.

"Have you any fresh accusations to hurl at me, Exalted Ruler?" the Luskanite snapped. "Or am I free to go, leaving you to sink back into your web of suspicions and feeblewittedly imagined conspiracies?"

"Dauphran Alskyte," Alustriel replied, sinking back into where she could let her perception drift out, "you have much still to answer. The small matter of Talanther's missing figurines, for instance."

The tradelord went white, showing her his guilt as clearly as if he'd babbled it before all her hushed court. "You dare—?" he hissed.

"I rule here, Dauphran," Alustriel reminded him gently. "For the safety of my people, I dare everything."

Aflame with rage, the Luskanite failed to notice the hesitant, half-asleep edge to her tone, or her nearly closed eyes. He shook his fists as he strode angrily around a table toward her, shouting, "I've *never* been treated with such insolence, wench! Accused of this, accused of that! D'you think we of Luskan are so crack-witted that we go around openly offending against the laws of trade and of state? Do you think we are all so governed by greed that we can't control ourselves from thievery and connivance from one moment to the next?"

His shrieks were echoing back at him from the far and dark corners of the room now. As he paused, eyes glittering, to snarl in more air and begin anew, Alustriel rose from the lounge and said simply, "Yes."

Dauphran Alskyte stared at her, mouth agape. She knew, now, that he was telling the truth about the murder, and that he was boiling with rage, barely keeping himself from leaping on her to claw with his hands, bite, and kick . . . something he'd done often to any number of Luskanite women. Those glimpsed mind-images made Alustriel's voice cold indeed when she said, "We do not propose to waste our time with you further this fair evening, Luskanite. We know of your guilt over the figurines, and your innocence regarding the unfortunate passing of Tradelord Muirtree, and we are frankly sick of your childish raging and insults. You will depart from our city by highsun tomorrow. If you do so in possession of something that is not yours, or tarry within our walls a breath longer than the decreed time, my armsmen shall take great pleasure in urging you on your way with whips. I shall instruct them to try to avoid any blows to your backside ... we would not want to harm what few wits you possess."

The tradelord swayed, trembling, and for a moment she thought he would rush at her, but instead he spat, "You have no authority over me, wench!"

"Oh?" The High Lady of Silverymoon lifted both of her eyebrows. "You'd obey any one of the High Captains—and any utterance from the Hosttower, too. Why, then, should you balk at obeying a ruler of equal rank, merely because she's a woman, and alone?"

Dauphran Alskyte opened his mouth to reply, then shut it again without saying anything. Alustriel didn't need the mindtouch that she'd let go to know that he was now realizing the weight of some of the words he'd used to her, and feeling the first touches of real fear. No wonder; were he in Luskan, he'd have been horribly and painfully slain some time ago for speaking so.

"This feeble-witted, deceitful, suspicious, and, yes, insolent wench is done with you, Alskyte," she told him calmly. "Keep silent as you leave us."

The little smile she gave him then had no mirth in it. The tradelord met her eyes for an instant, then looked away. He managed to suppress a shudder, but the weight of her cold gaze chilled his back and shoulders all the way to the door, and he began to hurry long before he reached it.

Janthasarde Ilbright was short, buxom, and enthusiastic. If she'd been an apprentice mage, she'd have been what one of the senior Spellguard wizards was wont to term, in distasteful terms, "perky." Her nature quickly overcame her awe of Alustriel, but she had little to add to the High Lady's knowledge.

She'd met Tradelord Muirtree on several of his previous visits to the city. If he was being impersonated by someone employing a magical disguise, or been ill at ease at their meeting, she'd noticed nothing amiss. She cheerfully surrendered her written roster of Muirtree's planned upcoming meetings, and confirmed what Alustriel saw at a glance. It held nothing out of the ordinary.

When she'd been thanked and sent back to her duties, Alustriel and Taern exchanged glances. The courtier had

been telling the truth, and that left them back at Auvrarn Labraster.

Alustriel squared her shoulders, sighed, and said to Taern, "Let the battle begin."

He nodded and went out, not smiling.

Glossy brown hair shone in the lamp's glow as Auvrarn Labraster set his square handsome jaw, and frowned. "I had not heard of Muirtree's fate, no," he said in a deep, mellifluous voice. "On this visit to your fair city, I've largely kept to my rooms—avoiding, as it happens, much of the gossip that skulks about this palace."

Alustriel gave him a wintry smile. "Would that more of my subjects behaved thus," she granted, then shifted forward on the lounge and asked, "I've heard from others that you and Tradelord Muirtree have had some sharp disagreements in the past. Is this so?"

Labraster shrugged. "We're both vigorous bargainers. I harbor no ill will toward the man."

"And did your meeting earlier today end cordially?"

"For my part, it did," the merchant from Waterdeep said flatly. "Muirtree was fine when last I saw him." He jerked his head up at the balcony above and added, his words almost a bitter challenge, "Have your tame wizard confirm the truth of that."

"What magic can uncover, magic can also conceal. . . or distort," Alustriel replied calmly.

"Lady," the Waterdhavian replied, his handsome features twisting into a snarl of exasperation, "how could I tear a man apart? With this?"

His hand tore a knife from its sheath at his belt, and he waved it high in the air, well away from the High Lady. Its tiny blade glittered in the lamp glow as Auvrarn Labraster sprang to his feet, flourishing the belt knife in mockery of a battle knight brandishing a great two-handed sword.

"This," he roared, "is the only weapon I brought with me to your city—the only weapon I customarily carry. With it, I

do great violence to cheese, and bread, and chops at the table. Pitted against fruit, I am a lion of savagery!"

Labraster tossed the knife into the air, caught it, thrust it back into its sheath with such force that his belt and breeches seemed destined to descend to his boots, and spat, "Now I've had enough of this foolery, High Lady. You offer little jabbing questions, worse than thrusts with such a blade. You insinuate, needle, mock, but never openly accuse, because you haven't a shred of proof against me."

He raised a finger to point at her as violently as if it had been a weapon, and snarled, "And you know what? You never will. I raised no hand against Garthin Muirtree. I did him no harm, he was hale and hearty when last we looked upon each other, and no honest examination, with spells or otherwise, will be able to conclude anything else."

He strode away, then turned, his arms spread in defiant mockery. "And we hear often back in Waterdeep how honest is fair Alustriel of Silverymoon, the Lady Hope of a nascent nation. Well, then, High Lady and Most Honest Alustriel, have done. Let me be. My ears threaten to shrivel up and drop off from all these biting, suspicious, endless little questions."

Auvrarn Labraster spun on his heel and stormed out of the chamber without waiting for a reply or dismissal. Before the door banged, his snarls of fury could be heard echoing away down the hall outside.

Taern came forward to the lip of the balcony. "His fury kindled very suddenly. One might even say conveniently."

"Mmmm," was Alustriel's only reply, as she bit her lip and stared at the closed door.

"Now what, my lady?"

Alustriel whirled around to stare up at her seneschal. "Who knows how the tradelord died?" she asked softly. "Did you or anyone you know of tell Labraster that Muirtree was torn apart?"

"No . . ." Taern replied slowly, his eyes narrowing. He acquired a frown and added, "but lady, he was telling the truth in every word he uttered to you."

"Yet for all his rage," Alustriel said thoughtfully, "he chose his words carefully—very carefully. I think it's time Auvrarn Labraster and I had a little meeting of the minds ... if you take my meaning."

Taern nodded. "If—however unlikely it seems—he's innocent," he asked soberly, "and your probing ravages his wits forever?"

His High Lady looked back at him grimly. "That's a price I'll have to risk," she replied. "I've done worse . . . and not all of my ill deeds have been inadvertent or through ignorance. A few—a very few—have even been done with glee."

"And this one?"

Alustriel gave her old friend a thin smile. "No, not this one. Not yet."

Their eyes met in wordless silence for the space of a breath before she turned toward the door, adding over her shoulder, "I'll do this alone, Taern. If I should fall, you know what to do."

The door closed behind the Lady Hope of Silverymoon, leaving Taern alone in the room. The man they called Thunderspell promptly leaped down from the balcony like a young adventurer, landing heavily on his hands and knees. He crawled forward a little way and bent his head to gently kiss the floor where her bare feet had trodden. Here, and there, he crawled on, missing not a single place.

When he reached the door, he scrambled up, wincing at the pains in his knees and his back, then rushed out into the hall, limping as he trotted. A guard gave him a puzzled frown, but the Master Mage of the Spellguard waved away the unspoken query. He had to get to a particular chamber fast—to where he could watch over Alustriel and assist her with his spells, should she need aid.

Not that one mage could hope to prevail where the Art of a Chosen fails, he thought wryly, but he can die trying. I love her that much, and more.

Alustriel slipped into an antechamber, slid behind a cloak stand, and did something to the wall behind it. The wall obligingly sighed inward, and she plunged into dusty darkness.

Should he be the sort of villain who sniffs out secret passages, or has so many intrigues a-dance at once that he goes not to his own chambers, Alustriel thought grimly, I may yet lose him. Her mood lightened then, and she almost giggled. Sweet Lady Mystra! Now I'm sorting my villains.

Her fingertips, trailing along an unseen wall, told her she'd passed two openings. When she came to the third she turned down it, hurried along until her outstretched hand found a wall, and turned to the left. There was a handle here . . . ah!

Light almost dazzled her as she stepped boldly out into the Ten Tapestries Chamber. Four sets of guest apartments opened off this reception room, and the only one in use right now housed Auvrarn Labraster.

The room was deserted, so palace servants and courtiers were spared the sight of their High Lady running like a schoolgirl from one door to another, sealing off all ways into and out of the Ten Tapestries Chamber except the secret way she'd used, and the main door that Labraster should come storming through in a few moments. A scant two paces shy of that door, Alustriel whirled to one wall, plucked two cloak stands over together, and stood motionless between them. She had just time to draw in one deep, gasping breath when the door banged open, and Labraster came striding through.

"Stupid bitch!" he was snarling. "Poking and prying like a priestess running a convent. How, by all the bright, blazing—"



The merchant's cursing hid the small sounds of Alustriel raising her ward across the door, then striding along in his wake. She'd reached the open center of the chamber when he encountered the ward across the door to his chambers, and recoiled with a wordless hiss of pain and amazement, breaking off his oaths in mid word.

Labraster shook his head, then thrust himself forward again as if there'd been some mistake. When the pickling, searing sparks of warning rose up before him once more, he snarled, whirled around, and saw her.

Silence fell and Auvrarn Labraster came to a halt in the same instant, dropping his anger like a cloak as he stared at her. His scrutiny was that of a warrior, seeking what weapons she held ready or hints as to what she might do next. His hand darted to his knife, then fell away.

The merchant peered this way and that around the room, seeking guards waiting in the shadows or behind the huge, hanging tapestries, but the room was empty, and looked it.

"Lady," he asked flatly, "what're you playing at?"

"Uncovering the truth about Garthin Muirtree's death, Goodman Labraster," Alustriel replied, her eyes locked on his.

"Is there something wrong with your hearing?" he asked, and without waiting for a reply added slowly, spacing each word with biting emphasis, as if rebuking an imbecile: "I. Did. Not. Slay. Muirtree."

"Then you won't mind my doing this," Alustriel responded, her eyes boring into his as she strode forward.

He was falling into those twin pools of hungry darkness, he was . . . gods!

"Lady," Labraster protested, as the first twinges of pain in his head sent a spasm across his handsome face, "this is neither right nor just. . . this is tyranny!"

"You stand in my power," she replied softly. "In my realm, wherein my word is law. Be not so quick to cry tyrant,

Goodman. Innocent folk, I find, object but little to my actions."

The Waterdhavian snarled under her mind probe, clawing at his forehead and struggling to back away. "Witch!" he spat. "I'll—"

He waved his arms, shrank down, then . . . changed. There was a moment of blurred confusion before Alustriel's eyes, then something much larger rose up before her in the lamplight. It was something huge, black, and broad-shouldered, its mandibles clicking as it took its first lumbering step toward her.

An umber hulk! The High Lady's eyes narrowed. An illusion? She took a swift step to one side.

The floor shook, ever so slightly, under the tread of its great claws. It ground its teeth, its mandibles clacking again as it opened a mouth that could easily close around her body, engulfing her down to her waist. It swung that great head to follow her movement. Its arms were even longer than its squat, mighty legs, and bore claws that were even larger. Talons that could cleave solid stone like butter flexed and arched open, reaching for her.

It was big, even for an umber hulk, and the yellow-gray of its belly and chest was purplish green around the edges. It seemed almost to burst with energy, vibrating with glee as it advanced.

Shoulders as broad as a wagon shifted, black scales glinting as the beast turned to face her squarely, its black eyes flickering. As she met their fourfold gaze, Alustriel felt the familiar numbness that mages created with the spell called "confusion." It was a floating, disembodied feeling that one who was not a Chosen would not have been able to simply shake off.

Aye, this was the real thing, all right, a Burrower Through Stone and not a spell-woven disguise. Did Labraster see through its eyes, from afar? Or control it unseen, from a few paces away? Or . . . ?

As claws that could tear her apart like a thing of paper and feathers descended to do just that, Alustriel knew she was looking at what had slain Garthin Muirtree. She called on one of the magics that by the grace of Mystra was with her always, and those descending claws froze in midair, held motionless.

"Care to return, Labraster?" she asked, trying to probe the black, impenetrable eyes of the hulk.

Her answer was another instant of blurring, and the monster was gone. In its place stood a gaunt man in purple robes, his eyes cold and hard. The ends of a crimson sash rippled at his waist as he bowed, and announced, "Azmyrandyr of Thay am I. Your doom, lady." The fingers of his flourished hands were moving as he spoke, wriggling like the legs of an agitated spider.

In unison Red Wizard and Chosen of Mystra each took a step backward, away from each other. As she moved, Alustriel silently called on another of her innate magics, raising a shell to quell all magic around herself.

"I seldom welcome Red Wizards into my palace, sir," she said coldly, "even when they come to my gates in peace. Your visit here is unlikely to be hospitable."

Azmyrandyr merely smiled, letting his smirk slide into a sneer as his spell took effect and the room exploded in flames.

A sphere of clear air surrounded Alustriel and the Red Wizard. He strode forward with something sparkling in his hand. Outside it, hitherto unseen globes of fire burst with force enough to shake the High Palace, transform ten tapestries into as many raging torches, and scour the rest of the room with roaring flames.

Azmyrandyr of Thay smiled a tight, cruel smile as the true target of his magic collapsed with a roar, and announced, "A slight refinement of the traditional meteor swarm spell."

The riven ceiling of the chamber plunged down on Alustriel in a rain of tumbling panels and flaming fragments. Struggling under the cascade of embers, Alustriel managed to stagger the first four steps of a charge at the Red Wizard before a tangle of blazing timbers smashed her flat.

Tendrils of silver hair roiled angrily among the wreckage, and Azmyrandyr eyed them warily as he took two quick steps forward and tossed a small, sparkling stone onto the floor, springing hastily back as the last burning pieces of the ceiling crashed down, bounced, and rolled away in all directions. As the stone landed, the sphere of nothingness that had kept the flames at bay melted away. The last, dying tongues of flame swept over hitherto untouched stretches of carpet around the smoldering heap wherein Alustriel lay.

"Wild magic stone brings down antimagic shell," the Red Wizard said calmly, for all the world as if he were describing a move in a chess game.

Nimbly stepping around the small fires still rising here and there about the blackened carpet, he backed out of range of the stone and raised both hands to weave another spell.

Rubble shifted and sagged away. Something sprang up from the blazing heart of the debris, somersaulting to one side in a tangle of long, flowing silver hair and smoke. Azmyrandyr's jaw dropped as the dainty High Lady of Silverymoon landed, vaulted without pause over another heap of rubble, and sprinted toward him, her gown smoldering around her and her lips snarling out an incantation as she came.

Hastily he abandoned his casting and stepped to one side. Something crunched under his feet, and he found flames rising around him. Hastily the Red Wizard moved again, but by then the furious face of one of the fabled Seven Sisters was almost touching his, and her bare hands were reaching for him. He slapped one hand away, and the

other drove into his ribs, glancing off bone and away in a wet, slicing glide that left searing pain in its wake.

Azmyrandyr of Thay screamed and hurled himself back, heedless of what flames he might stagger through. He fetched up against a scorched wall and stared at Alustriel's open hand. Her fingers were dripping with his blood as she advanced on him, entirely ignoring the waist-high flames she strode through.

A bleak smile touched her lips. "Laeral's Cutting Hand," she announced, her tones a mockery of his own.

The Red Wizard shrank away, then, as Alustriel's hand swept down, was lost in a blur of spell-shot air. Her descending fingers struck the naked blade of an upthrust sword that was held awkwardly in both hands by a younger Red Wizard, robed like Azmyrandyr, but sporting oiled, glistening black hair and a beard to match. There was apprehension on his face, but also, rising to overwhelm it, a fierce delight.

Waves of tingling nausea swept over Alustriel, and she fell back with silver fire licking around her hand. That gave her new assailant all the time he needed to rise and thrust his blade right through her belly.

She could not even find breath enough to scream.

"Taste a Sword of Feebleminding, Chosen of Mystra!" he shouted in triumph. His laughter rose above the crackling and snapping of the dying fires all around them. "Haha! You'll probably find it hard to serve your goddess well, drooling and mumbling your way around this palace for the rest of your days."

Alustriel staggered back, moaning, her agonies snatching the sword from the wizard's hands. He let it go to stand and gloat.

"Oh," he cried mockingly, putting a hand to his forehead as the High Lady of Silverymoon stared down at the blade beneath her breasts and sobbed forth spurts of silver fire, "I've quite forgotten my manners. I am Roeblen . .

. of Thay, but I'm sure you guessed that—back when you still could guess anything."

The wizard watched Alustriel sink to her knees, tugging feebly at the hilt of the sword to draw it forth, and laughed again. Striding over to her, he reached down for the hilt of his blade.

"Is there something more you'd like me to do for you, perhaps?" he mocked. "I've a sharp dagger ready for your fingers and tongue. Once spellcasting is beyond you, perhaps we could play. We could trade spells, you and I. Show me a spellbook, and I'll cast a painquench on you, eh? It should last just long enough for you to take me to your next spellbook, hmm? Or can't you understand such things anymore?"

The Red Wizard shook his head in mock sorrow. "Such a pity," he told her. "I was looking forward t—"

The woman on her knees before him growled, set her teeth, and wrenched forth the sword. It promptly exploded into starry shards.

As silver flames snarled forth from her in its wake, Alustriel raised eyes that blazed with pain to glare at Roeblen as she held up one hand over her head and a slender black staff appeared in it.

Roeblen's eyes narrowed. "A staff of Silverymoon, no doubt," he murmured, raising his hands to deliver a smiting spell.

One end of the staff lifted a little, and he changed his mind, backing hastily away.

"Wise of you, Red Wizard," Alustriel gasped, her breath a plume of silver flame as she climbed the staff to stand unsteadily upright, clapping a hand that glowed to the wound in her belly and gathering her will to begin what was necessary. " 'Twould have been wiser still not to have come here at all."

Roeblen spread his hands. "Such was not my intention, High Lady. I'm linked into the cycle. Azmyrandyr's calling

isn't something I can resist. I saw you only an instant before I was brought here, and had just time enough to snatch down my best creation . . . which you promptly destroyed."

Alustriel spread her own hands precisely as he had done, as her healing spell spread its soothing tendrils through her body. "A pity I'm immune to feeble-mindedness, isn't it?"

Roeblen's face twisted into a sneer. "For a mage centuries old, you're not very swift-witted, are you? Only a fool yields information to an enemy."

Alustriel shrugged, feeling almost whole again. "Mystra bids us educate the magically weak."

The Red Wizard's eyes snapped with anger, and he spat forth a fireball incantation, hurling it at the ravaged ceiling above her. Better to crush and bury this wounded Chosen rather than cast something her personal defenses might negate or even turn back on him.

With a singing sound and a whirling of sparks, one of Alustriel's wards failed across the room, and a door burst open. As both High Lady and Red Wizard turned to look, Roeblen's fireball burst overhead, shaking the room and spitting fire in all directions. Through its roar there came a tortured groan from overhead, slow and loud, but unending. Slowly, as it went on, it grew both louder and swifter.

As a reeling Taern Hornblade and a tall and handsome elf behind him clutched at the doorframe and stared in horror, the floor of the room above the blackened Ten Tapestries Chamber broke asunder and collapsed, spilling like a titanic waterfall through the shattered ceiling.

Stones roared down in a dark flood of death as Taern screamed something and the laughing Red Wizard retreated. Alustriel glanced upward, then raised the staff, aiming it straight up. It winked once in her grasp, and she looked at Roeblen and announced calmly, "Pass—"

The rest of the word was lost in the thunder of tumbling, crushing stone. It went on and on, hiding the ruler of

Silverymoon from view amid rising dust as stones cracked and rolled.

When at last the roaring died away to echoes and the dust began to settle, Roeblen turned away from his latest frustratingly futile attempt to bring down a door ward and spat out a curse. It should have been so easy. A word, two gestures, another word, and he should have been out and roaming around a palace legendary for its stored magic. It was too much to hope that the falling stones had crushed those two idiots in the doorway, but at least he'd felled the much vaunted High Lady of Silverymoon.

A figure came striding out of the dust then, a tall figure with a staff in its hand, whose silver hair stirred about its shoulders as if with a life of its own.

The Red Wizard's hissed curse turned into a groan of disbelief as two more heads came bobbing through the dust. Gods, had he missed them all?

Roeblen looked from one grim and dusty face to another, then murmured something swift and anxious, his intricately gesturing fingers momentarily shaping a closed ring. As the three folk of Silverymoon advanced upon the Thayan, the dust sprang away from him, swirling swiftly to outline the outer curve of a cylinder of clear, hard space around the Red Wizard.

The elf accompanying Taern waved mockingly at Roeblen and said, "Wall offeree; ring shaped."

Taern gave the elf a glance of mingled amusement and disgust, and started to weave a spell of his own. The elf grinned back and began his own casting. Alustriel gave them all a look of weary exasperation and merely lifted her hand. Blue-white bolts blossomed from her fingers and streaked up through the dust, seeking the gaping hole where the Ten Tapestries Chamber had once boasted a ceiling. Her glowing missiles turned there, in the dust-choked ruin that had once been a parlor on the floor above, and came arrowing back down inside the Red Wizard's



defensive ring. She saw an amulet at his throat flash as the missiles struck. Roeblen seemed unharmed, his hands never slowing in the casting of his latest spell. The cylinder around him glowed a bright blue and sang, the ringing noise swiftly rising into a scream as the radiance blazed into a bright, iridescent green. The light quickly faded, taking the wall offeree with it into oblivion.

Taern smiled at the Red Wizard in satisfaction and lifted his hands to weave another spell as the elf let out a sudden, startled squawk and cartwheeled away across the room, outlined in red radiance. Alustriel saw the sparkling stone Azmyrandyr had thrown wink once as the elf's boots left the rubble where he'd been standing.

"Wild magic," she called warningly, just as Roeblen of Thay's right arm started to grow.

The Red Wizard stood still as his arm became impossibly long, thick, and scaled, reaching fifty feet or more across the ravaged room to snatch with thigh-long claws at Alustriel. No human should have been able to stand upright attached to the weight of its huge bulk, let alone lift and move it, but the spell-spun limb swooped down on the High Lady as if it weighed nothing.

Alustriel's eyes narrowed. She'd never seen the likes of this spell before, and almost found herself looking at Roeblen and awaiting his proud announcement of the enchantment he'd used. No such words came, and as the claws descended, she fed it magic missiles. They vanished into it without apparent effect, the distant Red Wizard's amulet pulsing as each bolt died.

The claws tore at her, and she found them very real and solid indeed. Ducking away and lashing at the talons with her hair—each of the claws was now as long as she was tall—she managed to swallow a scream as they closed on her left shoulder and crushed it to bleeding jelly.

The pain drove Alustriel to her knees, retching. She heard Taern cry out her name, then gasp and call on Mystra.

Rolling over on stony rubble and writhing in pain as that scaly limb came down to tear at her again, Alustriel stared at her dangling, useless left arm. Where her shoulder should have been there was nothing. It was hard to see through the silver smoke streaming from the wound, but the raging fire had left her little more than clinging ashes of her gown. She could see a lot of smooth, bared flesh, flesh that was changing as she watched. In an eerie webwork, scales were forming on her skin, spreading swiftly outward from her wound.

The claws missed on their next snatch, thanks to her tumbling, and when Alustriel found her feet again, she thrust the staff at them. Roeblen snatched at it, trying to take it away from her, and she let it go. She hissed out the words that would awaken a fleshfire spell before leaping at the scaly limb.

She caught at greasy scales, slipped, then clung. Her body blazed up into bright fire. Grimly she dug her fingers in around the edges of the scales and hung on as the smaller scales on her own flesh faded away and a stench like old swamp water arose from the darkening limb around her.

Roeblen roared in pain—and the High Lady of Silverymoon was falling, her blazing arms clutching nothing. She landed heavily, slithering on stones, and found herself looking into the startled face of yet another Red Wizard.

Roeblen, his scaly limb, and her staff were gone, and the elf was moaning against a distant wall. Taern was staring at her with hope, alarm, and despair at war across his face. The pain was ebbing.

Alustriel gave the newcomer a wolfish smile and charged, her body blazing. "Welcome to Silverymoon," she spat, silver flames making her words a bubbling horror, and she saw that horror rise swiftly in the Red Wizard's eyes as he stammered out an incantation, gesturing frantically.

He finished his casting a bare instant before she slammed into him, clawing at his face. She knew she'd hit

him by the way the fire faded from her limbs as they rolled together. Alustriel had no clothes or weapons but her knees, teeth, and right hand. He was shorter but heavier than she was, and had no desire to be here at all. He'd flee, bringing in the next being in the cycle Roeblen had spoken of, unless she got a good grip on his throat, and . . .

The Red Wizard twisted away desperately as she spat silver fire into his face and tore free. Alustriel was left holding a scrap of purple cloth as sudden light blazed into being above her, taking the Thayan mage away.

She held up the cloth to keep from being blinded, and read aloud the name embroidered in a circle there, around a sigil, unfamiliar to her: "Thaltar."

When the light faded and she saw another hand beyond the cloth, she launched herself forward onto whoever it was, and found herself panting and grappling with Auvrarn Labraster.

There was fear on the merchant's handsome face as he fended the High Lady off with one arm and peered around. She saw him take in Taern advancing on him, the ruination all around, then the furious gaze of Alustriel of Silverymoon but inches from his face. Auvrarn also obviously did not want to be there. In feverish haste he thrust three fingers into a breast pouch under his chin, desperately seeking something.

Alustriel punched him in the throat.

Coughing and gagging, Auvrarn Labraster rolled away from her, hoarsely trying to curse. She hurled herself upon him, not wanting him to have time to get at whatever small but fell thing awaited in his pouch. They rolled over and over as she clawed at his face, sobbing every time their struggle put weight on the ruin of her shoulder.

At last Labraster struck aside her clawing hand and got both of his hands on her throat. They stared into each other's eyes, hissing in fury, as his fingers started to tighten.

Her hair swirled around them, slapping across his eyes and thrusting up into his nostrils.

The merchant gagged and snarled and shook his head violently back and forth, not loosening his grip around the throat of Silverymoon's Bright Lady. He never felt tresses of silver hair tear something off the chain around Alustriel's neck and knot that something into his own hair, but he did feel her surge upright. She thrust upward to her feet with astonishing strength, dragging him with her. Two rough hands slapped across both his ears, making his head ring. Before Labraster could even cry out, the hands took hold of his ears and tried to twist them off.

Auvrarn Labraster screamed and let go of Alustriel's throat, staggering and ducking as tears of pain poured forth. Twist and flail though he might, those hands stayed with him, twisting.

In desperation, he threw himself to the ground and rolled—and the hands were gone. Labraster heard a man grunt nearby, land heavily on loose stone, and roll away. He wasted not an instant on seeing who it was, but snatched the teleport ring from the pouch on his breast and fumbled it onto his finger.

Another hand was at his throat again, and he punched out with desperate force, connected solidly, and heard Alustriel gasp. He twisted blindly away again. Cloth tore at his breast, then Auvrarn Labraster hissed the word he needed to say, and was thankfully gone.

As Taern clambered across shifting stones to where his lady knelt, she lifted a face still wet with tears to him, and struggled to speak through a throat dark with bruises. She held a scrap of dark cloth clenched in her hand.

"My lady!" Taern Hornblade gasped, kneeling beside her bare, blackened body. One of her arms still dangled uselessly, and pain creased her face, but she smiled at him and said huskily, "Kiss me, Taern."

He touched his lips to her forehead with infinite care. Alustriel made a disgusted sound and hauled him down to her mouth, mumbling, "No, Taern, I mean really kiss me. I'm too weak to resist you now . . . and there's not much left of me that you can hurt."

Something small toppled from the floor above then, and plunged down to burst amid the stones. Blue lightning played about the chamber. As Taern crouched over his lady to shield her, Alustriel looked down at the scrap of torn fabric in her hand and murmured to the empty air, "Well, it's up to you now, sister."

## **Sylune**

### **The Haunting of Blandras Nuin**

*There is death for most, undeath for some, and a wraithlike place beyond death for a few. I was going to say "the favored few," but increasingly I suspect some of them would coldly dispute such a judgment. May the gods, in time, show mercy upon them.*

Lyritar Sarsharm, Sage of Tashluta

from *The Roads Beyond Faerun*

published circa the Year of the Turret

There came a cold and drifting time of nothingness that seemed to freeze her utterly, beyond gasping, and to go on forever ... but she knew from what Elminster and Alassra had said that it in truth lasted so briefly that even those watching for it could not be sure it had befallen.

There was light then, and sound again, and she was somewhere unfamiliar, looking out of eyes that were not her own; these were male eyes. She had to be deft now, and patient, so as not to be noticed by this host. It was alert and angry, and its mind was dark with rage and evil. The mind is a powerful thing, and this one was very far from an abode Sylune of Shadowdale would ever be comfortable in. Her sentience had awakened in the tiny chip of stone Alustriel usually carried in her bodice, but had somehow managed to tangle unnoticed into this man's hair, knotting its fine strands securely around the stone.

She could only live, now, out of such stones—pieces of the fire-scarred flagstones of her now vanished hut. The Witch of Shadowdale was dead, and yet, through the grace of Mystra, not dead nor yet "undead," at least not in the chilling, feeding-on-the-living manner that carried most undeath onward through timeless days. When she walked in Shadowdale, 'twas true, her feet made no dint upon the grass, and folk could see through her, and termed her

"ghost," and were fearful. Usually Sylune used a body made to look like her old, true one, or kept herself unseen, unless she wanted to scare.

Sylune sighed now, a sound only she could hear, and banished such dark thoughts. She had died and yet lived, through Mystra's love and aid. She should be ever joyful, but she had been human, and it is the way of humans to complain.

The Witch of Shadowdale shook the head she did not have, and briskly applied her thoughts to the here and now. It took mighty magic to send her from one stone to another when they were not touching, and she knew, somehow, that she was far from Shadowdale. Alustriel must have spent silver fire to weave such a spell. That meant this was a matter of great importance, but then her journeys were always matters of great importance. Sylune smiled with lips she no longer possessed. 'Twas time to save the world again.

She was in the mind of a man who knew Waterdeep well, by all the images of it crowding each other in his place-memories. He was a wealthy man, a merchant, linked to other beings by some sort of slumbering but recently awakened magic. The man was standing on a rocky, windy hillside where bell-hung goats wandered, a little way outside an arc of standing stones that stood like jutting monster teeth before a dark cave mouth.

This was the abode, the man knew, of a hermit priestess of Shar. He'd been here twice before, and both feared and was disgusted by the old and ugly crone who dwelt here, and stank so, ate things raw, and whose fingers were always stained with blood that was not her own. Meira the Dark was a thing of bones and malice, half hidden in rags and an improbable fall of long, glossy black hair.

The man moved forward reluctantly and drew forth his dagger, holding it by the blade, and through his eyes Sylune saw that he had clean fingers adorned with rings. He lifted the dagger to use its hilt to strike a door gong. His mind

termed it such, though his eyes told her that it was a cracked iron skillet hanging from a weathered branch that had been thrust into a hole in one of the larger stones.

"Don't bother," a voice sounded. The voice was sharp and a little rough, as if long unused. "Come within. The ward of serpents is down."

Though the voice seemed to come from someone near at hand, the man could see no one. He sheathed his dagger with a low growl of disgust and stepped cautiously forward through the grassy gap between the two tallest, center-most stones.

Something moved in the shadow of the cave mouth, sidling forward into the full light to squint up at her visitor. Meira was just as the man remembered her, fondling the yellowing curves of a squirrel skull necklace as she came forward to peer at her guest. "So, what trouble is it this time?"

"Why should you assume I have trouble?"

The priestess snorted. "Handsome, wealthy, charming Auvrarn Labraster has his pick of playpretties in half a dozen cities of Faerun, and more money than Meira has ever seen in all her life. Enough to hire spells from the Red Wizards he sports with, enough to think himself important indeed... and this would be the same Auvrarn Labraster who can barely conceal his disgust when he stands near old Meira. Trouble brings him here. Trouble is all that could bring him here."

Sylune withdrew everything from the mind of the man she rode, clinging but to his eyes and ears so as to be as invisible to magic as she dared be. Labraster shifted his feet and replied stiffly, "Yes, I have trouble, and need your swift aid."

The hermit priestess snorted. "Sit on yon rock and spill all. Even I haven't the patience to drag words out of you. Speak."

"I've just used this ring—the only teleport ring I have—to escape Alustriel of Silvermoon. My hands were around



her throat in her palace just minutes ago, and I called on the cycle. She fought and survived everyone in it to bring it back to me again. We left a room afire and several of her Spellguard mages knowing my likeness. I will be hunted a—"

Meira held up a hand with a hiss of anger. "Perhaps traced already. Yet you do not need me to tell you what a fool you are. I can see that much in your eyes."

She grunted, and drew a ring on a cord from somewhere under the rags she wore. Holding it up, she hissed in annoyance, let it fall, and fumbled around in the vicinity of her bodice until another cord fell into view. She snatched up the ring and squinted at it, made a small, satisfied sound in her throat, and with a sudden wrench, broke its cord, sliding it onto one of her fingers. Lifting her eyes to Labraster's, she snapped, "Take off your teleport ring."

Slowly, he did so, holding it cupped in his hand. The priestess gestured with her head. "Set it down on that rock, and step back outside my porch ring."

When the merchant had done as he was bid, the priestess took the ring back off her own finger and set it down on another stone. She approached Labraster's ring and stooped to peer at it, seeming almost to sniff at it in suspicion before she murmured a spell over it, watched the brief glow of her spell fade, then cast a second spell. After a moment, the ring quietly faded away.

"What did you do?" the merchant called out angrily. "D'you know how much that cost me? Where's it gone?"

Meira regarded him over one hunched shoulder with some irritation, then beckoned him to approach. "To an alleyway near the docks of Waterdeep, with a spell on it to keep someone from seeing or tracing you through it."

"But it'll be lost! Someone will see it and snatch it up! I —"

The priestess nodded. "A small price to pay for continued life. *I'd* not want to have to fight off a Chosen of

Mystra, even with the Blessed Lady of Darkness standing at my side. Would you?"

As Labraster gaped at her, she snapped, "Now stand here—just here—and don't move, even after I stop casting. I'll need different spells for you and your clothes, so don't stir again until I say so."

"Why?"

Meira squinted up at him. "That," she snarled, "is one of the words I most hate; one of the reasons I don't stand in a temple teaching cruel young things to know the kisses of Shar. Utter it again, and you can face Alustriel alone."

Auvrarn Labraster swallowed, stood just where she'd indicated, and kept silent. Meira shuffled all around him with a little smile crooking the corners of her mouth. "That's better," she said. "Now stand you just so."

She continued her slow circling as her hands traced gestures in the air with surprising grace. She seemed almost to be dancing as her cracked lips shaped words that seemed both fluid and strangely angular, cruel and yet softly sliding, words that betimes rose to frame the name of the goddess Shar. When she was done, she stood with hands on hips and regarded Labraster. In her squint was a gleam of satisfaction.

"Aye, you'll do," she said at last. "Can you live without the rest of the little magics you have hidden on you now—and won't tell me about?"

"Surrender them, you mean?"

"Nay, have them still, but asleep, not working."

Labraster hesitated, then sighed. "If I have to," he said, "yes."

She was as cold, cruel and deadly, this priestess, as the goddess she served. Shar, Mistress of the Night, the Lady of Loss, the Keeper of Secrets, the goddess revered by those who did cruelty to others, and worked dark magic, under cover of the night. She was evil with lips and hips, the night mists her cloak, her eyes always watching out of the darkness. Labraster shivered, and tried to put the feeling of

being coldly watched—a feeling crawling coldly between his shoulders, nowhere near the old hermit in front of him—aside. He did not find it easy.

"Good," Meira the Dark said crisply. "Put this on your finger, and keep it there." She picked up her own ring from where she'd set it on the stone and handed it to him.

Labraster turned it in his fingers as if trying to delay putting it on, then plunged it onto one of his fingers with almost frantic haste. As it altered its shape to fit the digit perfectly, Sylune felt a tingling and darkness descended around her. She drifted through brief chaos, then abruptly, was seeing out of Labraster's eyes once more, and hearing out of his ears again, but cut off from his mind, his touch, and smell. The surges of his thoughts and emotions were gone. She was riding alone again.

"What is it?" Labraster asked, holding up his finger curiously to examine the plain silvery band.

Meira chuckled. "It carries its own tiny magic-dead zone, covering you and a little of what you touch—or hold. The best shield I know against prying archmages ... or the Chosen servants of the goddess of magic." She waved at the stone where the ring had lain, and said, "Now sit here."

When Labraster sat, she drifted up behind him and reached around to hand him something. It was a polished fragment of armor plate that served as a crude mirror. Labraster peered at it, at his new face. It was still fair to look at, but rather less commanding in looks. His hair was almost blue-black, eyes green now, nose a little crooked. He reached up to touch his own cheek. The feel of it matched what he saw. This was no illusion, but a reshaping.

"Who've you made me look like?" he demanded, turning to face the priestess.

She was no longer there, and in that same instant Auvrarn Labraster felt a sudden, sharp pain in his neck. She'd bitten him! He whirled around the other way with an oath, flinging out his arm—

Again, she was no longer there. Labraster felt a gentle tug at his belt.

The priestess was kneeling in front of him, her eyes flashing up at him, bright and very green.

"What're you—?"

Her eyes fell to the belt buckle in her hands, and she murmured, "Now for my payment."

Auvrarn Labraster resisted a sudden urge to ram his knees together, smashing what was between them, then to kick out, hard, and send a bleeding bag of bones sailing away to a hard, bouncing landing.

The bag of bones that could slay him in an instant, or send him to sure doom whenever it chose to, flicked bright, knowing eyes up at him now in a sly taunting. She knew how he felt. Oh, she knew.

He watched her calmly unbuckle his belt and said levelly, "I prefer to choose beforehand whether or not I must lose any body parts. In like manner, I like to have some say in any partners I may take in intimacies."

Meira the Dark looked up, arching one bristling eyebrow. "Do you now?"

She jerked open his breeches with a sudden, violent tug and added softly, "I bit you, man. If I will it so, your every muscle will lock, holding you rigid. You will be unable to move ... unable to prevent me from removing the ring and my disguising spell, binding you hand and foot, and transporting you thus onto Alustriel's dining table—or kitchen hearth spit."

A certain paleness crept over Labraster's face. He made a helpless shooing motion with his hands before snarling, "All right..."

Her hands were cool but wrinkled. Their warts brushed his flesh as she held onto him for support, sat back a little, and did something to her rags. They fell away from one bony shoulder, and he almost gagged at the smell that rolled forth. Meira looked up at him, her eyes flashing, and thrust

her wrinkled self forward against him again, purring like a cat. He felt the hot lick of her tongue on his thigh, moving slowly inward, and gentle fingers probing . . . before she made a sad little sigh and sat back, slapping him in a very tender place.

Green eyes glared up into his. "*Give*, man!" Meira snarled.

"But I ..." Labraster growled, his voice stiff with disgust, his face scarlet.

Meira drew a little way back from him, on her knees, and sighed again. "No one loves me for what I am," she said sadly, staring down at her wrinkled hands. "No one has ever loved me for what I am."

She looked down at the ground in front of her, face hidden by her tangled hair, and Labraster sat silent, not daring to move or say anything. The priestess stirred, and he saw her clench one dirty hand. She rose to her feet, letting her rags fall to the ground in a little ring around her, looked expressionlessly at him for a moment, then turned and walked away.

Labraster stayed where he was. A gentle breeze slid past, ghosting down the hillside, but he moved no more than a stone statue, his eyes fixed on the ugly priestess as fear grew within him like a cold, uncoiling snake.

She stopped a few paces away and turned to face him in full filthy, sagging splendor, her eyes two green flames as they met his. Still holding his gaze, Meira raised her arms above her head, cleared her throat, then matter-of-factly, almost briskly, cast a spell.

Before his eyes she grew taller, her hair stirring restlessly around curving shoulders as she grew both more slender and more shapely. Long, long legs, a flat belly, and . . . Labraster swallowed and barked, hardly believing the beauty he saw. A spicy scent wafted from Meira as she strode forward. Labraster searched her with his eyes, feeling lust stirring within him, a rising warmth that checked for

only a moment when his gaze rose far enough to find her green eyes unchanged in their knowing, and anger.

Meira glided up to him and wove slender fingers through his hair, guiding his head to her, "Such a little thing Meira demands," she murmured. "Do you still know how to be tender, man? Show me ..."

Slender fingers momentarily brushed against a tiny chip of stone amid curling hair, and as if through rippling water, Sylune saw the face of Auvrarn Labraster, tight with apprehension, shifting and sliding into the face he now wore, brighter somehow than it had seemed in the mirror. A cold, dark sentience was sliding over her, considering that face, then Labraster's own again . . . then seeming to place another face over it, so that one showed through the other. She knew this new face, and tried to keep herself calm and still as the dark sentience that could only be Meira quested past, comparing it with Labraster as he really was, and doubting that the Waterdhavian merchant was suitable to masquerade as the other man.

That other man was King Azoun IV of Cormyr.

The morning was cold, the pit-privy was filthy and swirling with biting flies, and the bowl of wash water both gray and icy. The priestess, moving naked around her smoking cooking fire, was her old, wrinkled self again. Auvrarn Labraster smelled her unwashed stink on his own limbs, and wrinkled his nose in distaste. Even his own transformed clothes itched and felt... wrong.

Without looking up she handed him a steaming, rather battered tankard as he approached. It smelled wonderful, but Labraster cradled it in his hands and sniffed suspiciously. "What might this be?"

"Soup," she said sweetly.

"I can tell that," he growled. "What's in it?"

"Dead things," she growled back, turning green eyes on him. They held a certain sparkle that made the merchant

want to glance down at himself to make *sure* that nothing was missing. He hesitated, then, involuntarily, did so.

She snickered. "Ah, the great Auvrarn Labraster, scourge of the masked revels of Waterdeep." She tossed her head and laughed again, lightly. "Waterdhavians have such high standards, don't you think?"

Labraster shuddered, and brought the warm comfort of the tankard to his lips. "If you're done mocking me, woman," he growled, "perhaps you'll find time enough to tell me just whose shape I now wear, eh?"

"Blandras Nuin," Meira told her own tankard promptly, scratching herself and reaching for the pile of rags that evidently served her every wardrobe need.

Labraster watched her with fresh disgust, and asked unwillingly, "*Who's 'Blandras Nuin'?*"

"A man I sacrificed on the Altar of Night a few days back," the priestess said, bending to a nearby stool to kiss the oily lashes of a black, many-tailed whip reverently.

The merchant grunted, and shifted a little away. Anything dedicated to Shar was best avoided. "After you served him as you served me?"

Meira's head snapped around. She looked more shocked than angry, but her voice was as sharp as a thrusting sword as she said, "He was for Holy Shar, and Shar alone." Her thin lips drooped into a catlike smile, and she added, "He looked quite—ah, striking as he died."

"And the body?" Labraster asked, looking around as if he expected to find severed hands serving as cloak hooks, and hairy, bloodless legs bound together to hold up a table.

"Once a ritual is done, and it is properly blackened or doused in purple sauces, any suitable sacrifice to the goddess may be devoured by her worshipers," Meira said primly, then glanced sidelong at her unwilling guest as he gagged, and added slyly, "I did keep certain pieces for dessert." The merchant's shaking hands spilled soup on the cave floor.

She knelt and slithered forward between his legs to lap it up. Labraster hastily backed away, seeking another place to sit. His shoulders came up against the rotting, blackened hides that served her as doors, and in an instant he spun around and shouldered himself out into the light and the fresh, frigid air.

"Gods," he growled, blinking at the brightness and cradling his hands around the battered tankard. His stomach lurched anew at the thought of the wrinkled priestess stirring a man's hairy leg into her soup caldron.

Soup caldron ... he looked down in horror, and hurled the tankard as far and as hard as he could, found his knees in scrabbling haste, and vomited everything in him onto the ground so furiously that his spew splashed his eyebrows. Hot tears of rage and revulsion blurred his eyes as he coughed and spat.

"Such a waste," that sharp voice he was beginning to hate so much said coolly from behind him. "There's none of him left in that. 'Tis all bustard and black voles and rockscuttler lizards. Oh, and a snake; a rock viper, but a little one, too young for his fangs to be deadly."

Her words failed to reassure Labraster. The merchant turned his white, trembling face away from her as he rose and stumbled over to one of the standing stones. He leaned against it weakly and drew in deep, shuddering breaths of air. A hand like a wart-studded claw patted his behind, the fingers lingering to caress.

"More, valiant merchant?" Meira cooed, clear mockery in her biting tones.

Auvrarn Labraster sprang forward and away, whirling around and slapping at his sword hilt. "Away, witch!"

The wrinkled, toadlike creature in front of him looked almost comical as it pouted, but one look into those green eyes quelled any mirth that might have been rising in Auvrarn Labraster now and for perhaps the next month or so. They held a cold and waiting promise that told the merchant



he'd been judged expendable. One wrong step would be his last, or worse he'd be violently unmanned and teleported, maimed and still screaming, into the hands of Alustriel of Silverymoon, only to be hauled back again like a hooked fish, if Alustriel should show him any mercy. Back to the cooking pot, no doubt strapped to that bloodstained worktable and cut up alive, piece by piece, while Meira the Dark discussed seasonings with him, and—no, no more!

Labraster shook his head, his eyes closed, and he heard himself gasp, "For pity's sake, priestess! I've a heavy load, and mean no offense, but, truly, I—"

"You find Meira not to your taste," the priestess said, her voice more sad than angry. "Well, you're not the first, nor the last." She glanced up at him with the suddenness of a snake, eyes bright. "You'll find your way back here, though, when next your needs outstrip that ambition of yours, and Meira will be waiting. Oh, yes, perhaps to play the man, then, to your woman, hmm? We'll see. Oh, aye, well see."

Labraster shivered. She meant every word, and a small part of him was even excited. What sneaking spells had she worked on him, to make him think so? How much of a leash did Auvrarn Labraster now wear?

He had to get out of there. He had to get away from this woman and her foul cave. Fleeing all the roused Spellguard through the High Palace of Silverymoon was starting to seem preferable to this. Labraster drew in a deep breath, lifted his head, and forced himself to open his eyes and to smile.

"A part of me looks forward to that," he admitted, and saw Meira's green eyes flash. "You can use spells if you want, to confirm that I speak truth."

The priestess shook her head. "Nay, lad, I can see. I can also see that you want very much to be off and about your scheming, tarrying here no longer. Hear then my advice. Go nowhere that Auvrarn Labraster would, and reveal your disguise to no one. Let your affairs be run by your agents, even if they begin to subvert and swindle. The ring will keep

you out of even the cycle's summons. You know how to contact those of us who matter, if need be. Don't go wandering back to claim treasures Labraister hid and finish deals he left hanging. The Chosen—and the Harpers, now—will be waiting and watching for that."

"For how long?" Labraister growled. "The High Lady of Silvermoon still has no proof against me. After all, I did not slay the tradelord. Such legal niceties would not matter, say, to those who rule in Luskan, but she is one who does take refuge in laws, and hold to them."

Meira lifted her misshapen shoulders in a smooth shrug. "For as long as need be. You lost a life, merchant—yes, the one you'd built, but most of us only ever get one. Think of a fresh start, a chance to deal with some traveling traders who'll come unaware that you know their true natures as a challenge, hmm?"

Labraister bowed his head, "I grant that, though it does not yet seem a gladsome thing to me. So tell me, who am I? Blandras Nuin, yes, but who is Blandras Nuin?"

The priestess lifted her lip in an unlovely smile, like a dog about to snarl. "A man of moderate prosperity, ruled by honesty. An innocent in the intrigues of the world, content to live out his life in trade."

"Trade in what, and where?"

"Blandras Nuin is a trader in textiles," the priestess said grandly, as if telling a fireside tale to rapt children, "respected in his home city of Neverwinter. He seldom travels, and when he does, 'tis usually to Everlund or Silvermoon, on matters of business. He's a kindly man, with little interest in women beyond watching tavern girls dance, and has no family or relatives."

Labraister looked pained. "Textiles? What do I know about cloth?" he snarled.

Green eyes twinkled. Their owner replied crisply, "Whatever you'll learn between here and Nuin's house. It is a tall and narrow abode, roof of old shields sealed with pitch,

stone lion gateposts, on Prendle Street. You'll have six servants, but the old chambermaid Alaithe is the only one who really knows you—that is, the real Blandras Nuin."

Auvrarn Labraster sighed, glanced around at the standing stones and the hillside falling away into the trees, then brought his head up to peer at the priestess who'd transformed him. "I've no choice, have I?" he asked, his words more bitter than he'd meant them to be—but not nearly as bitter as he felt.

"None at all, Blandras Nuin," Meira told him. "Now start walking."

Labraster's brows lifted stormily. "Can't you teleport me?"

The priestess pointed a wart-studded finger at the merchant's hand and shook her raven-haired head. "The ring, remember?"

The darkness of closed eyes, and the roaring that meant Labraster's snoring would render his ears useless until he awakened, left the eldest of the Seven Sisters utterly alone once more. She was alone and alert, not needing to sleep, but unable to ride a body around to look at new things, and talk to other beings, and see more. She was alone to think.

So what had she to show for all the hard work Dove, Qilue, Laeral, and Alustriel before her had done? A little more than the usual quiet, underhanded alliance between a rogue at one end of a caravan route and a thief at the other. A little more even than a trading coster gone bad, or illicit goods bought with stolen coin. It was a shadowy chain of varied individuals who worked covertly in Scornubel, Waterdeep, Silverymoon, a hermit's cave somewhere north and east of Longsaddle in the wild hills between the Long Road and the Goblintide, here in Neverwinter, and presumably in distant Thay . . . probably also in Sembia and Cormyr, and possibly in Amn and other Sword Coast ports such as Luskan and Baldur's Gate.

They behaved not unlike the Zhentarim, but enough unlike their work to remove them from suspicion, even if there'd been no Thayans or Sharran clergy to make the differences sharp.

Drow were working with humans to supplant other humans, using magical guises—long-lasting shapeshifting; powerful magic needed there. Humans were busily engaged in smuggling, hidden investments, market manipulations, and slavery, but such a widespread secret organization, with all of its perils, was hardly needed for anything but the slavery and smuggling. So why? Larger aims, as yet unseen, must underlie it all. The presence of the Red Wizards—who by nature need great power, and therefore work at a great reach, whether prudent or not—and that of any clergy of Shar both pointed to bigger things.

Just what those bigger things were was probably beyond what Labraster knew, but not necessarily beyond what he could guess.

Well, Chosen of Mystra could make guesses, too. If drow could masquerade as humans in Scornubel, what was to stop others in the cabal—yes, call it that, however ugly or possibly misplaced the word—from using similar means and magics to take the places of other folk, elsewhere? They'd target rich folk, of course, influential folk, rulers—why else had others considered this Labraster a fitting stand-in for Azoun of Cormyr, and Meira thought him too weak?—and elder noble families, energetically rising merchants, those who commanded armies or controlled fleets, caravan companies, and trading costers.

It was grain and beans again. Centuries ago, a certain bored, younger Sylune—restless and not yet rooted, not yet the Witch of Shadowdale, not yet loving any place too closely, and the poorer for it—had watched merchants grow rich. Oh, aye, merchants grew rich all the time, sometimes by innovation and more often by rushing in needed goods when there were shortages.

She remembered a few growing rich by virtue of the mercenaries they could hire to burn crops in one place, or fight the mercenaries hastily hired against them across sown farmers' fields, which bought the same result. They'd take advantage of these shortages, rushing in goods they'd already secured elsewhere when demand and prices were highest.

Grains and beans. Not so glamorous as kidnapped princesses or fell wizards cracking castles asunder, but just as hard on the folk whose land the wars raged through, or who starved outright or dwelt in misery, for the lack of things that need not have been scarce. All the while merchants who hired armsmen to kick back beggars rode in ever grander coaches to revels where they grew fatter and laughed louder, guzzling wine and eyeing each other's new jewels and hired bedmates, until they were all so bored that feuds and hunts and the ever-changing whimsy of styles known as "fashion" came to the fore as a way of spending time and coin.

Just the way of the world, a Waterdhavian merchant dead and dust these four hundred years had told her, derisively dismissing her protests at such behavior. Just something she hadn't, of course, the native wits to understand, and should leave off thinking about and hurry, while she still had her looks, to the nearest whorehouse to get back to earning herself a living.

She'd tried that, too. Mirth still rose in Sylune after all these years at the haughty merchant's wife who'd looked down from a festhall balcony with scorn at the silver-haired dancer and called out that she might as well wear naught but pig herders' boots to do what she did ... only to recognize her own son in Sylune's arms later the same night... a Sylune wearing only pig herders' boots, which she'd given the man to present to his mother on her morningfeast platter the next day. The woman's shrieks of rage had been the talk of her hitherto quietly exclusive

Waterdhavian neighborhood, but that woman, too, was long dead, and her fine son. Sylune, caught defending her beloved dale in the heart of a storm of dragons, should have followed them both into the cold, eternal darkness, but for the love of her sisters and the grace of her mother Mystra.

"Oh, Mystra," she prayed now, alone in the darkness with no voice to speak aloud. "Let me do what is right and best for thee and for all Faerun . . . and let those two rights and bests run ever together."

From dark nothingness came a faint, singing sound. The gentlest echo of a chime Sylune had heard before, when drifting in the arms of the Lady of Mystery. It lingered around her, almost faint beyond hearing, then was gone.

The Witch of Shadowdale smiled, and knew peace, for she was no longer alone in the darkness.

"What if I do not choose to follow this road longer? This meandering backwoods trail that leaves me far from my city, my business, the folk that I love and know, and, by all the good gods there may be, from the—the—"

"Action you crave?" the hooded man's voice was smooth and unruffled. Something that was almost amusement rippled across its rich tones.

"Well, yes. I'd not have put it that way, but this does leave me far from my coins and my battles, and yes, the grander things we ... are both part of I chafe in these chains." Labraster's voice had risen high in exasperation. Something in the other man's stillness warned him that he was drawing too much attention to them both, and he dropped his voice almost to a whisper to add, "They drive me wild. Sometimes I think I may go mad."

"So much is increasingly apparent, Blandras Nuin," the cloth merchant's visitor replied. "Yet it does you no credit in our eyes if we see in you a weakness. Those lions who are always bold to be a-hunt, in at the slayings whenever they scent blood, all too often move too soon and ruin things. Even when they do not, their restlessness makes them poor

allies after the victories have been won. Cold patience sits comfortably in some of us, and turns our wits to think ill of those who have too little patience, or too much hunger for the chase."

"But it's been months now," Labraster protested, clenching one hand—the hand that bore a certain ring—into a fist, "and until you, today, nothing but silence. Silence and selling cloth. Gods! More than that, I tell you, Harpers are as thick hereabouts as flies on rotting meat."

"Perhaps too apt a choice of words," the hooded man murmured. "More than one of us in a certain city much visited by caravans has fallen to Harper blades in recent days. The dead carts held many surprises. Much flesh that was as black as the darkest night. Your swift and thorough flight from the questioning of the High Lady has done much to hold you blameless in this—among those who look for blame in such things."

"I thought that project was overbold from the first. How many actors can there be who can fool kin and trade partners and all, night and day, eh?" The cloth merchant waved a dismissive hand, then almost lunged forward to hiss, "Can you tell me nothing of what else has befallen? So many plans were on the brink of becoming real projects. Just to know a few shreds of—gods! Cloth again!—a little of what's happening will keep me alive, keep me feeling a part of things."

"You find excitement a drink every bit as alluring as good wine, Master Nuin?" the hooded man asked softly. "Think on this, then. Like wine, excitement can be all the better when it's aged properly."

Auvrarn Labraster growled, deep in his throat, and smoothed out a bolt of cloth with unnecessary savagery. "You'll give me nothing at all?"

"I did not say that," his visitor said smoothly. "There's word from Sembia. Tael is ready to move. The inn outside

Westgate called the Black Baron burned down a tenday back, and—"

Labraster's head jerked up like a stabbing blade. "*What?*" he hissed. "Did anyone get out? What was found in the ashes—and down in the cellars?" He leaned forward eagerly to put his hand on the hooded man's arm, to shake out some answers if need be. He came to a sudden, silent halt, as a bared blade slid out of the sleeve where an arm should have been.

That calm, smooth voice said reprovingly, "Master Nuin, I've heard it said that overeagerness has carried many a lion over a cliff. You've heard the same, I trust?"

Auvrarn Labraster swallowed, stepped back a pace, and nodded, his face carefully expressionless once more. "Yes," he mumbled, then cleared his throat, threw his head back, and said more clearly, "Yes. Yes, I have."

The hood seemed to nod, almost imperceptibly, as new customers entered Blandras Nuin's shop and headed straight for the proprietor. "Other engagements press me hard now. Perhaps I'll return to buy your excellent cloth another day, but it may not be soon. Perhaps even ... next season."

"Of course," the man who wore the name Blandras Nuin agreed with a quick smile. "I shall be waiting here; eager to serve you, as always."

He saw teeth flash in the gloom of the hood, for just a moment, shaping a smile. "Of course."

The hood turned away, but as its owner stepped around an advancing customer to seek the door, turned back again. The voice that rolled out from within it one last time was somehow no louder, and yet still as clear as if it came from right beside the cloth merchant's elbow.

Its tones were gentle, almost fatherly. "It all comes back, Master Nuin, to patience. Try not to forget that."

Blandras Nuin stared at the door as it banged, not seeming to see the customers now gathering before him.



"Old friend of yours?" one of the tailors asked.

"Sounded more like a creditor," another grunted.  
"Trouble, Nuin?"

Blandras Nuin looked down at him sharply, then smiled a thin and mirthless smile. "No, just matters halfway across Faerun that I can do nothing about."

"Ah, investments," the first tailor said wisely, nodding.

"He in the hood was right enough, then," the second added. "Nothing to be done about what's out of your reach except drop all and ride to seize it—or learn a little patience." He grinned ruefully, spat thoughtfully into the floor rushes, and added, "I've learned me a lot of patience."

Patience was her strength, and Sylune—as little more than a silent, thinking thing—clung to it in the days that followed, as Auvrarn Labraster settled into being a colder, more cruel copy of Blandras Nuin, and learned the cloth trade, and looked for sideline dealings that could earn him rather more coin for rather less work. She watched him swindle, and watched him deal fairly—and she watched him murder.

She was powerless to work magic, powerless to whisper in his mind, touch him in his dreams, or influence his waking mind in the smallest way. She was powerless to do anything but ride him and experience life as he did—at least until he really combed out his hair.

Labraster was disgusted with himself for being so swiftly singled out in Silverymoon, disgusted with the shape and life he'd had to adopt, and disgusted whenever he thought of the woman who'd given both to him. He took little care over his appearance, sighing instead for his own lost good looks whenever he passed a mirror. So a little chip of stone remained where it was, and he never knew how close he was to delivery from loneliness. Not that it would have been the sort of deliverance he'd have welcomed.

At least Neverwinter was cold in winter and damp with sea-breezes all the year round. Folk needed clothing, and

clothing was apt not to last overlong. The man who was not Blandras Nuin grew all too used to the hitherto unfamiliar reek of mildew as the tendays passed. Neverwinter was a city of crafters, and he had much competition from lace weavers and furriers and even women who made exotic knots from silken cord, but it was also a city of fashion, of men and women with a taste for style and the wealth to indulge that taste. Some of them liked the styles of Waterdeep, and suppliers from Waterdeep were folk he knew. They had no idea that he knew them, for they saw the kindly face of Blandras Nuin hailing them from the door of a modest shop, not the grander face of Auvrarn Labraster sending an agent over from his coach to stop them in wider, less muddy streets. Yet he knew their weaknesses, and whom they owed coin to, and when they were desperate. He was careful to befriend them, to win their respect, to make them regard him as important, so far as Neverwinter was important. He dealt with them fairly and soon, he dealt with them often.

The coins started to come. Bolts of cloth gathered less dust, and Blandras took less and less mold-stained and mice-nibbled stock to the copper coin markets outside the walls, and looked a little less drawn about his face. His shop grew no larger, however, and no new coach or steed appeared in his stables. Gossip soon suggested he owed money elsewhere, and was sending it away with the same men who brought him his cloth . . . and as he did nothing scandalous, or seemingly anything at all outside of his shop, really, gossip soon forgot him.

Certain eyes and tongues in the city would have been surprised indeed to learn that no less than four of the houses on Spurnserpent Street now belonged to Blandras Nuin. They'd become his one at a time, in an inexorable march along that old lane situated on the edge of the expanding area where the wealthy were tearing down and rebuilding in grander style. They'd have been still more surprised to learn

that the modest, kindly cloth merchant was just waiting for other folk to move before sending an agent to make offers on others ... but the only eyes that did notice belonged to local Harpers, and they were pleased to see coin going there and not into something unseen or suspicious that meant they would have to skulk at the shutters of yet another fine, upstanding citizen.

An unseen, ghostly lady who'd had over six hundred years to take her measure of folk watched the world through the eyes of the man who was not Blandras Nuin, and heard as he did the words he spoke, and saw his deeds. She wondered sometimes, if things had been different, if this was a man she could have turned to truly become the sort of man he was pretending to be. A man she could have welcomed to Storm's kitchen table with a glad heart, however many murders had stained his hands in the past. After all, her own had certainly known blood enough, and Storm welcomed her.

One could always build a legion of castles on "if things had been different." Those who tried to, in life, were often the most dangerous ones. More than that, she'd had long enough to learn that men cannot be turned. They can only turn themselves. One can ruin a life with a single, crippling sword stroke, or a blinding iron, but one cannot guide the unwilling save by example and by holding out choices, and only when the unwilling don't realize what is being done. Sylune was also determined that she would do no more than guide. Down the years the eldest of the Seven Sisters had heard enough whimpering, of dogs and men, to have any favor left for the boot or the whip.

Yet she already knew that whatever Blandras Nuin was becoming, Auvrarn Labraster only really understood boots and whips. She would have to be his whip—if ever she got the chance.

Sometimes Blandras Nuin bought drinks for traders in other goods from Waterdeep, the more garrulous merchants

whose wares never touched on bolts of cloth or garment-making. He sat with them, and made them feel welcome and in the company of a friend, and gave them an ear that listened all the night through, and was never attached to a face that looked bored or hostile. He seemed to some a dreamer after the gilded bustle of a city he'd never dare to try his luck in, one of many such on their travels who were hungry for their talk of who was riding high and who'd fallen down in the City of Splendors. He wanted to know where things might be heading for those fortunate and wealthy enough to pitch in when the coins started to roll. New fashions and the latest nasty gossip of betrayals and debauched revels, noble feuds and men—and increasingly, women—found dead in new and stranger "suspicious circumstances," fueled an ever-burning curiosity. If the eyes of the man who bought their drinks widened at some of the names, why then they always seemed wide and avid, didn't they?

Temple scandals and guild rights, warehouse fires on the docks and new turrets added to the already overgilded houses of merchants rising past their ears in coin; he listened to it all.

Those nights of Waterdhavian tales were the times when Blandras Nuin bought extra bottles to carry home in his fists, or strayed to the houses where lamps burned late and silken scarves hung at the windows, beckoning lonely men inside.

Unnoticed and invisible, Sylune rode her unhappy steed through days, then months, drawing the cloak of her patience around her and waiting, waiting for the moment when a certain ring would come off Labraster's finger, and give her the chance she needed.

The moon rode high above scudding clouds this night, and the breeze off the sea reached cold fingers right through his thin cloak. The man who sometimes forgot that he'd ever been Auvrarn Labraster reeled more than a little as he came

down the worn stone steps of the Howling Herald, leaned for a moment against the stair post topped with a gaping gargoyle head, and was noisily sick all over the refuse strewn in the lee of the post.

Ah, but he'd drunk too much—a *lot* too much. Good old Blandras Nuin had lent small sums to a lot of men to subtly spread his influence and circle of friends, and most of them never intended to pay it back. As long as he kept smiling and not mentioning it and draining the tankards they bought for him, there was no need to kill him. Cut off from his armsmen, alley boys, and more sinister allies, Auvrarn Labraster had to be careful about things like that. He was alone, like any other idiot merchant whose friends lasted just as long as the coins in his purse. Any shadow could hold ready knives and grasping hands.

A shadow moved in the gloom of the narrow passage between the Herald and the bakery next door. Labraster moved hastily, if unsteadily, around to face it, feeling for his knife.

Eyes gleamed in the darkness, then teeth, curving into a smile. "Go home, weaver," a voice hissed contemptuously. "I know how empty your purse is."

Rage rose in Labraster, just for a moment, and with its coming, his head started to pound as if quarry hammers were setting to work on the back of his head.

"Errummahuh," he agreed hastily, turning away and hurrying off down the street, away from the softly chuckling shadow waiting by the stair post. Gods, but a youth with a long knife probably could open his kidneys for him this night, with ease, and leave him to bleed his life away in the mud, bereft of coin, and alone. Alone . . . the smiling image of the priestess Meira swam into his mind, then, and he groaned and clutched at his head.

"No," he whimpered. "Gods, no. A toothless alley whore would be cleaner and more loving."

That mumbled conviction took him around a corner onto Boldshoulder Street, which was cobbled, uneven, and dotted with the mud and dung of many wagons. He realized this only as he slipped in one such offering, his left boot shooting out wildly in front of him.

A moment later, he'd measured his length helplessly in midair, and a moment after that he slammed down so hard on his back in rather liquid horse droppings that the breath was hurled out of him. His elbows and head went numb, and he could barely find strength enough, in the sudden dizzying swirl of the moon above him, to writhe in pain.

It must have been some time later when he rolled over. Dazedly he recalled that at least two separate pairs of boots had clicked hurriedly past him without stopping. He was cold, his head was splitting, and he reeked with wet, green-brown dung.

"What had they been feeding the horse that did this?" he snarled, on the verge of tears from the smell and his headache. "And how by the God on the Rack could it have been in any state to pull anything?"

Somehow he found his feet again and stumbled on down the street. Prendle was just two lanes over, and in his house he could get a bath. Nuin had an ornate tub. The man must have had a thing for cleanliness. Perhaps he'd fallen down, just like this, once too often, and gotten tired of crawling naked under the pump in the stable yard. Auvrarn's stomach lurched as a stray breath of sea breeze brought a fresh waft of the smell coming off him to his nose. The breeze didn't touch his hair, which felt like glue. There was probably dung all through it. Labraster moaned, and felt like throwing up again—well, gods, why not?

Emptying his stomach into the street made him feel just a bit better, but it still seemed like a stinking, reeling eternity before he found his own gateposts. The stone lions stared patiently out into the night, not bothering to give him the disgusted and incredulous stares several of his

neighbors had favored him with as he'd reeled past, knowing he was wearing a sick smile and raging inside, He muttered a heartfelt curse upon the heads of all hermit priestesses, High Ladies, and stupidly honest cloth merchants, wherever they might be, and kicked and hammered at his own front door until he felt better.

That got him one thing. When the last of his three keys clicked in its lock and the door groaned wide, both of the young, empty-headed maids he'd had to hire to replace Alaithe were awake and in the hall, wide-eyed and clutching garden shears and fire tongs in their trembling hands. They were wearing two of his dressing gowns, and had obviously been too stupid—fortunately for him—to think of together lifting the door bar into place.

He cursed them all the way up the stairs. Nalambra and Karlae—Stonehead and Clumsyhands. Ardent and curvaceous they might be, but they were also slow and lazy everywhere but in bed. Anticipate his needs? Think at all for themselves? Bah! Now he'd have to shiver naked in the cold metal bathtub for hours as they pumped water and gasped their way up the stairs with hearth fire-warmed rocks to heat it.

Alaithe would have had a hot bath waiting, and if he'd not bothered with it, she'd have had fresh rocks ready to heat it anew in the morning, without a murmur of complaint. For perhaps the seven hundredth time he regretted strangling her and burying her in the garden, but he'd had no choice. She'd been suspicious of him from the first, and set about devising little tests and traps to see if he wasn't the "real" Blandras Nuin. Once he'd smelled the kaurdyl in his morning broth, he'd had no choice. If she was trying to kill him, it was time to slay her. Fat and unlovely she may have been, but what a housekeeper! Perhaps, to Blandras, more than that. Hadn't it started that first night, when he'd bolted his bedchamber door and pretended to be asleep when she'd tried to open it at dawn?

Ah, gods, but none of it mattered now. "Nalambra! Karlae!" Labraster snarled. "Stop all that screaming and get up here and pump." Gods, but he *smelled*. He unlatched the window that overlooked the garden and started hauling off sodden, dung-caked garments and hurling them out into the night. Out with it, out with it all!

Even the boots went, and the belt with the dagger built into its buckle. No one would scale the high, barred gate or force a way through the thornhedge to steal things so foul anyway. All he left—in an empty chamber pot, not on the table—were his coin-purse, his belt-knife, and the rings from his fingers—all of them. As they clattered into the pot, he shoved it away with his foot, stepped into the bath, and grimly crouched down to wait. He knew he was going to have some long, cold hours yet before morning.

The worst of the dung was gone from his hair and his skin, at least, but the bath Auvrarn Labraster sat in was brown and covered with a swirl of bubble-adorned white scum. It smelled as if it was more liquid dung now than water. Worse than that, it was cold, and getting colder by the minute, and his two lazy maids with the stone-sling and the hot stones that would make this bearable were nowhere to be seen.

"Nalambra!" he bellowed. "Karlae! Where in all the yawning pits of the Abyss *are* you?"

As if his shout had been a signal, two throat-stripping screams erupted downstairs. A chair fell over, or maybe a table—the whole house shook—and fainter crashes followed, one of them the bang of his front door trailing all of its chains and bolts as it slammed shut, then rebounded. The splintering crash that came on the heels of that booming sounded as if someone had burst out of the kitchen midden chute without waiting to open it.

Then came the silence, stretching out in the cold as Labraster waited, and shivered, and waited.



"Nalambra?" he called, when he could wait no longer, "Karlae?"

He rolled out of the bath and stood up to hear better, leaning forward with one arm on a chair. Shivering thus, he waited until the water he stood in stilled again, and listened intently for any sounds of movement in the house below. Even stealthy sounds that meant he'd best find the blade under the bed would tell him something, but there was nothing more than the faint whisper of the sea breeze blowing through open doors and windows below.

"Blast all smugly blazing gods and their sky splitting thunderbolts!" Auvrarn Labraster snarled at last, as his wet hands slipped and he fell on the cold lip of the bath, before crashing back down into its depths with a helpless, mighty splash, that emptied the top foot or so of its contents all over the room around him.

His candle lamp went out.

Labraster stared into the darkness in real alarm. There'd been no breeze, the thing had full shutters to keep water—even a wave of dung stained bathwater—out, and the candle had been less than a third burned down. What, then, had ... ?

Something that glowed faintly glided past the doorway, and Auvrarn Labraster's heart froze. He struggled to swallow, to rouse himself to rise and run for his sword, but the blade was in his bedchamber, and the bedchamber was through that door.

The glow was out there, somewhere off to the right, but he knew all too well what he'd seen. It was the image of a burly woman—Alaithe—bobbing along just as she'd always bustled along the upstairs hall. An image that glowed, that he could see through, and that moved in utter silence.

It came back again, and he bit his lip to keep from screaming. The ghost of his housekeeper moved more slowly this time, as if carrying something he could not see. She did not look in his direction or appear to know he was there, but

on her throat he could clearly see the dark, deep grooves of fingers.

Auvrarn Labraster shivered, snatched up the only thing he could reach that might serve as a weapon—the bath stool—and cowered down in the icy, noisome bathwater. He would not scream. He would not die here this night, if he didn't leap out the window or do something stupid. It was only an image, nothing that could harm him.

When Alaithe's sad, hollow-eyed, glowing face rose up out of the waters between his knees, Auvrarn Labraster discovered that he could scream. Quite well.

She loomed forward as she emerged from the water, swaying over him like a snake, her face coming ever closer to his. He tried screaming again, enthusiastically, and again.

"Be silent, master," she said, her white lips moving, "or I'll touch you."

Quite suddenly Labraster discovered that he could keep very quiet. He whimpered once, deep in his throat, but the ghost came no closer—not that six inches from his own nose was a comfortable distance. For just a moment, the face so close to his melted into skin shriveled over a skull, with a fat white worm crawling out of one eye socket. Labraster struggled on the shrieking edge of howling out a scream, then the face was Alaithe's again, plump-necked, familiar, almost motherly, and somehow reassuring.

"The dead rise because they need to know," Alaithe whispered, her voice the same husky drone, "and I have a need to know why you slew me, and more—much more. I will haunt you forever, no matter where in all Faerun you run, unless you release me to my rest by telling me all. Speak freely, man, so long as you don't scream or shout."

"H-haunt me?" Labraster stammered, raising the stool up out of the water like a shield.

"Haunt you, man, freezing your heart and your loins, so that you always feel cold. Appearing at your shoulder for others to see, whenever you try to court, or make deals, or

speaking to priests. More than those, you shall never sleep again unless I desire to let you sleep, and never share a bed again unless it be with someone who is blind, and deaf, and feels not the cold. Yes, I shall haunt you, man."

Auvrarn Labraster sank down in the now icy water, shivering uncontrollably. The breeze rose and blew sea mist into the room, but the ghostly woman leaning over him never wavered or took her dark and terrible eyes from his.

"A-and if I tell you what you want to know?"

The ghost seemed to recede a little from him, and her strangled voice came more faintly. "Then Alaithe whom you slew shall sink back into the garden, and you shall see her no more."

"I... you won't hurt me?"

"Not if you tell all," the ghost said in tones of doom, "and avoid using any of the lies that fall so easily from your lips."

Auvrarn Labraster licked those lips, heard his teeth chatter, and asked, "C-could I, perhaps, get out of this bath?"

"Of course ... if you'd like to try to bed a ghost, or answer my questions out in the street, just as you are." The ghostly face was very close to his, and so were its fingers, outstretched on either side of him and curving inward toward his throat.

Auvrarn Labraster gave a little yelp, ducked down until the cold water splashed his chin, and managed to say, "H-here is just fine—uh, just fine! A-ask your questions."

"Why did you slay me?"

"B-because you tried to kill me!" Labraster said quickly. Ghostly hands reached for him, and he shouted desperately, "Because you knew I wasn't Blandras!"

"And what happened to my good master?"

"I don't know," Labraster babbled. "I—an evil priestess forced me to come here. She changed me into his shape."

"What did I say earlier about lies?" A cold finger slid forward, and the quivering, whimpering merchant felt a needle of ice stab through his left eye. Though his trembling fingers found no blood or wound, he could not see out of that eye.

"Don't make me touch you again, man," the face so terribly close to his added, in its droning whisper. "Tell me the truth about Meira and the altar Blandras Nuin died on."

"Y-you know? Well, why make me tell you if—"

"I want you to tell all. I need you to tell all. If I cannot rest, neither shall you."

"Aha, aye, yes yes," Labraster said hastily, terror making his tongue swift. "I—I was visiting the priestess Meira for my own purposes, and sh—"

"Which purposes?"

"I needed to hide from a foe. Her spells could do it."

"And who are you, really?"

Auvrarn Labraster drew in a deep breath. "A merchant of Waterdeep. Uh, no one important. I'm a dealer in furs and trinkets. My name is n—"

"Auvrarn Labraster, have a care for your remaining eye," the ghost said mildly.

"—ot so well known as I'd like. Auvrarn Labraster, as you know, and—and—"

"And you are hiding from what foe?"

Labraster licked his lips. "Ah, Alustriel, the High Lady of Silverymoon. I—we fought."

"Why?"

"There was a murder—a tradelord of Neverwinter. She thought I did it, but it was an umber hulk, really, and—"

"And you can tell me the truth, Auvrarn Labraster, about your connection to that umber hulk, can't you?"

"I—" Auvrarn Labraster's good eye narrowed, and he asked, "What does this have to do with Blandras Nuin?"

"I need to know it all, false man and murderer, all. The cycle, the wizards of Thay ... I need to hear it all from your

lips. You will feel much better once you tell me. Much warmer, to be sure, for the furs that cloak your bed await but steps away."

"I could just get up and run *through* you and get those furs now!" Labraster shouted through chattering teeth, the bathwater swirling wildly about him.

"Men whose joints are frozen can't bend them. They can fall—once, but thereafter they cannot even crawl."

Auvrarn Labraster moaned and slid back in the bath until the waters lapped at his mouth. "I could just let myself slide under," he murmured.

"I think you know that I would not let you die until I'd heard it all," that horrible, patient voice came back at him.

"How would I know that?" the shivering merchant shouted. "You tried to kill me, remember?"

The husky voice of the wraith glowing above him was, somehow, dripping with contempt. "Kaurdyl is a *spice*, ignorant man. Only huge doses of it can kill—then only when it is mixed with certain oils."

"A-and how is it that you know that?" Labraster asked quickly, as if each accusation was a weapon that could fend off a vengeful ghost.

"All cooks have to know such things. If they can't be bothered, they become merchants instead. If they're too lazy to make coin as a merchant, why then, they can always murder a merchant and take what is his, can't they?"

The man in the bath shrank down so suddenly that cold water lapped over its edge and slapped across the bath chamber floor. "I never killed Nuin," he stammered. "Y-you know that."

"I was speaking of other merchants, back in Waterdeep," the ghost said flatly, 'but I'll speak no more of them. *You* will speak. You will answer my every question, or —"

Ghostly hands stretched out, and the merchant's teeth set up an uncontrollable chatter from the sudden chill. He

waved a desperate hand, fending the wraith away, and cried, "I'll tell! I'll tell!"

The ghost nodded. "You will indeed," she said, and it sounded like a king's command.

Labraster stared at it—her—and ran one desperate hand through his wet, ruined hair. When he found his voice again, it sounded on the quavering edge of tears, "Will you tell me something first? I need to know why you rose. I mean, folk die all the time, and they don't come whispering to their sons and daughters wanting to know things."

"You'd be surprised," the ghost of Alaithe said in a voice that echoed with doom.

Labraster stared at her, swallowed with an effort, then pleaded, "Just tell me, please? Did Blandras mean all that much to you?"

"Yes." The whisper was so fierce, and the ghostly face so close to his, that Auvrarn Labraster almost threw himself under the water without thinking.

He cowered for a long time, staring into the dead gaze in those dark pits of eyes, before he managed to ask, "Love?"

In answer, the wraith hovering over him drew away to the foot of the bath, and rose upright then, slowly, turned from the fat, motherly, homely figure of Alaithe into a younger, buxom, strikingly beautiful woman. "I was once like this," the ghostly voice came to him, "and Blandras knew me then. He loved me, and I spurned him. Our ways parted. Years later, I was as you knew me—" The vision of beauty became the familiar bulk of Alaithe once more. "—and was thrown out of my job in favor of a younger, more beautiful woman. I came to Neverwinter, and by chance, begging for work in the streets, met Blandras. He took me in."

"As your master, or man?" Labraster asked roughly.

The ghost drifted a little nearer. "There is hope for you yet, murderer. As my husband, Blandras was. Now it is time for you to answer me again."

Labraster let out a sigh, shivered uncontrollably from cold rather than fear, and hugged himself in the frigid water. "Yes," he said faintly. "Ask."

"You and the priestess Meira are part of a chain of folk who work together. Who are the others?"

"There are drow, in Scornubel, who speak to me and others through one of their number, the slaver Brella," Labraster said slowly. "They, as I, have many who work for them personally, knowing nothing of us or our aims. A woman in Waterdeep, for example, has no idea why I give her orders to invest thus or hire so. It is hard to ans—"

"Meira outranks you, as you outrank Mrilla Malsander. Who is of your standing, or higher?"

"The Red Wizards Azmyrandyr, Roeblen, and Thaltar, at least two other Red Wizards above them, I think, and at least one other mage who leads us all. There are other clergy of Shar whose names have been kept from me."

"Does your group have a name?"

A bitter smile touched Labraster's lips. "You begin to sound like a watch officer . . . no."

"Who is that one other mage?"

Labraster looked very nervous. "I—there may be a spell on me that slays if I speak his name."

The ghost drifted almost nose to nose with the shivering merchant, and said softly, "Why not risk that chance?" Ghostly fingers slid down to loosely encircle Labraster's throat. They did not touch him, but he could feel the icy chill radiating from them,

"I, ah, the mad mage who dwells under Waterdeep! All know of him. Need I name him?"

There were many dark stories about Halaster Blackcloak, the mad wizard who lurked in fabled Undermountain—stories of an old, thin-lipped sorcerer who could stroke cats and aid children, or blast towers to rubble with revelers inside, or transport horrific monsters onto the feast tables of proud merchants. A wizard mighty enough to

spell-tame dragons with a wave of his hand, or blast mountain peaks to rubble if they ruined his view. Labraster had heard grisly stories around many a tavern hearth about the Mad Mage of Undermountain, and some of those tales might even be true. As the years passed, stories he'd scoffed at in his younger days were turning out to be disturbingly accurate, if they were about wizards. He wished he could say the same about some of the other tales.

"Halaster Blackcloak is hardly lucid enough to lead a cabal for long, unless it was of folk working only in Undermountain," the ghost said, leaning so close that Labraster felt a chill all over his face and throat, and was jolted cruelly back to the here and now. "Who *really* leads you, Labraster?"

"I know not—I *swear* I know not! Even Meira knows only her Sharran superiors, just as I know the Thayans! Please believe me, 'tis truth!"

The ghost withdrew a little from the sobbing man in the bath and asked, "And your aims? Tell me more about them."

Auvrarn Labraster sagged against the high, upright masterpiece of scrollwork that was the back of his—well, Blandras Nuin's, but his now—bath and gasped in relief, staring at the ceiling with one wild eye and one blankly staring one. The ghost let him pant for a long time before drifting nearer, but she did not have to threaten again before he started to stammer out a reply.

"Smuggling and s-slaving, of course. Th-the drow are taking over the rulership of Scornubel, taking the places of those we enslave. Things stolen in one city are hidden and sold elsewhere in hard winters or when war threatens, for high returns. Such schemes are my tasks. Those above me work more ambitious schemes, breeding malcontents here, sponsoring rebels there—and themselves using magic to change their shapes and take the places of important persons."

"Such as?"



"High officials in Amn, Baldur's Gate, Westgate, all over Sembia, and Mirabar. More soon."

"Working toward?"

Auvrarn Labraster drew in a deep breath, groaned, and said in a rush, "Supplanting the rulers of Nimpeth, Cormyr, and Hillsfar."

"You are joined in a 'cycle' enchantment with an umber hulk and three Red Wizards, wherein each of you can trade places with the next being in the sequence so that you could leave a confrontation, and bring the umber hulk to stand and fight in your place. Whose doing was that?"

"The mad mage's."

"Are there other cycles within the nameless chain of intriguers to which you belong?"

"I believe so," Labraster said wearily. "Gods, let me get warm, I beg of you."

The ghost slid up to almost touch noses with him once more, and whispered, "You strangled me, man, and now dare to beg for mercy?"

Auvrarn Labraster looked back at her through one failing eye and mumbled, "Yes. Yes, I guess I do."

He tried to shriek, a moment later, as that icy hand touched his blinded eye again, but he found he could do nothing. He was frozen utterly in an icy grip that could crush him at any time. The merchant couldn't even breathe as the hoarse, husky whisper of the woman he'd strangled echoed through his head:

*Be glad, Auvrarn Labraster, that Alaithe is merciful. Remember that mercy for the rest of your days—in particular, whenever you hold the life of another in your hands. Throats are delicate things.*

He could see again, dazedly, blinking in the sudden light as the candle lamp, so long dark, flickered up into flame again by itself. He was blinking with both eyes. He could see again.

The water was still cold, and there was still an icy chill lingering about his throat, but the ghost was gone. With a sudden, wild hope, Auvrarn Labraster stood up, bathwater raining down in all directions, and looked around.

There was no eerie glow. He was free of her.

He ran his hands through his dripping hair, shuddering and shivering uncontrollably now as the breeze coming through the windows quickened. When he turned and leaped out of the bath he didn't care that his wet feet skidded on the floor and he almost fell, didn't care that the fouled water crashed down over the floor in a mighty sheet in his wake, and he certainly didn't hear the tiny *tink* of a small fragment of stone falling into the nearly emptied bath.

The man who was not Blandras Nuin pounded naked along the upstairs hall, sniveling and shivering, and plunged through the open, dark door of his bedchamber with his teeth so loudly a-chatter that he could hear nothing else.

The candle-glow from within the closed curtains of his canopied bed would have brought Auvrarn Labraster to a wary halt on any other night but this—but as it was, he bounded across the room and tore them wide.

It was a measure of his chilled, near-delirious state that Labraster found nothing unusual in the fact that a lamp that he'd left behind in the bathroom should be hanging above his pillows now, merrily alight. Nor that two maids he'd cursed into fleeing him then heard injuring themselves in headlong terrified flight from a ghost downstairs earlier this evening should now be curled up nude in his bed, unharmed, with their hair neatly combed over their shoulders, so deeply asleep that his screams and shouts in the bathroom hadn't roused them. No, Auvrarn Labraster took in just one thing—and, as he always had in life, plunged heartily in to seize it.

His leap took him into the little cavity between the curved and muscled backs of Nalambra and Karlæ—a space not large enough for anything larger than a stretched out

and trusting cat. Both maids awoke in sudden, shrieking terror as they were landed upon and thrust rolling out of bed by something very cold and very wet, that struck both hard and with a vicious disregard for their comfort.

They both landed hard, but were up in a howling instant, running headlong and screaming for the door. Nalambra, by virtue of being hurled to the floor on the door side of the bed, got there first, but slipped on a puddle in the hallway just outside the door. Karlae, upon encountering an obstacle, clawed her way blindly up Nalambra's back. They fell through the door together, sobbing in utter terror and slapping and flailing at each other in a frantic whirlwind, somehow disentangled themselves in the hallway beyond, and ran headlong into the shadowy arms of a wraithlike figure that hung waiting in the hallway. It was silent, more slender than the ghost of Alaithe, and as dark as the night.

Sleep overcame Nalambra and Karlae as they passed through the dark arms they never noticed. As they tumbled limply toward the floor, something unseen gently caught them and left them floating, sprawled in midair.

The dark, ghostly figure glided down the hall to the door the two terrified maids had erupted out of, and peered in.

The canopied bed still held the candle lamp her spells had whisked there. Its warm rays fell upon a huge, shivering mass that looked like a man rolled up in all of the bed linens and over furs at once, so that only a little of his face could be seen down a sort of tunnel. A muffled moaning was coming from the heart of the untidy bundle, and a trail of water led through the door up to the bed where it lay.

The dark figure made a sighing sound and curled the fingers of one hand together. The candle lamp obediently went out.

A howl of fear arose immediately from the bundle, but the dark figure ignored it, turning away to go back down the

hall again. Sylune had waited a very long time for the man in the bed to take off his magic-dead ring, and she did not intend to let this chance slip away. Besides, playing ghosts was good fun.

Her fading essence couldn't spin spells for much longer, though. 'Twas a good thing this fearful merchant liked to surround himself with enchanted swords and daggers—and an even better thing that he feared the magic-dead ring would break their enchantments, and had hidden them all carefully away in a locked cabinet along the back of his best bedroom wardrobe.

At least a pair of them were shortly to follow into oblivion the glowstone from the box by his bedside that Auvrarn Labraster didn't yet know he'd lost. Oblivion might well have claimed some targets of the cabal whilst Labraster was in hiding, with a certain powerless Chosen of Mystra accompanying him.

It was high time to hand this evil chain of schemers a setback. To do so swiftly without revealing to all of them that the Seven Sisters knew of them and were on the hunt—something that might cause desperate reactions, and get a lot of folk killed—would involve something the Witch of Shadowdale was usually loath to do. She would have to unleash a fox among the chickens. Three Thayan mages in turn had struck at Alustriel, and the scourge of Red Wizards was the Simbul, a fox apt to run somewhat wild. Sylune recalled rather bitterly reminding her sister from Aglarond that when castles are hurled down, folk one has no quarrel with are apt to get maimed and crushed, not just dueling mages. This once, perhaps, such bold and reckless strife was necessary, just as removing a little stored magic from Faerun forever was now necessary.

"Forgive me, Mystra," the ghost whispered on its way into the bath chamber. "Let one magic feed another."

The dark, ghostly figure swept to the sink and held two daggers over it. There were two flashes, like stars twinkling

out from behind dark clouds! Two dark hands trembled and seemed to grow more solid, then sudden darkness returned. Ashes drifted down between slender fingers into the sink, where a single brief pour from the ewer of ready water chased them down the drain and away. Sylune was a tidy person.

She was also one who hated unfinished tasks. With all speed she returned to the hallway and outlined the two sleeping maids with the same ghostly glow she favored when appearing to murderous and waterlogged merchants as the phantom of Alaithe. The Witch of Shadowdale smiled, waved her hands in a few quick gestures, and caused their hair to stand out stiff and straight in all directions and their eyes to open and stare blankly into the darkness, though they slept on. She arranged their bodies with hands at sides and feet pointed out straight, then turned them in the air so that they floated upright a foot or so above the hallway floor, side by side and facing the bedroom. If Labraster took it into his head to come eavesdropping on her, he'd have to physically force his way past them and somehow, Sylune thought he wouldn't be very eager to do that. For good measure, she left a ghostly image of the worm-eaten Alaithe hanging in the bath chamber doorway, bloated up so as to entirely fill the doorframe.

Sylune floated over to the open window to look out at the Neverwinter night. There were white, staring faces in the windows of several houses nearby, looking her way. The Witch of Shadowdale smiled broadly, gave her translucent, wraithlike self a bright green-white glow, and caused her head to rise up until it was a good three feet above her shoulders.

She waved cheerfully at the house where the loudest scream erupted in response, and strolled forward through the window to stand, nude and magnificent, her hair billowing out around her, in the empty air some sixty feet above the dark and garment-strewn garden below.

She wove a sending to chat with a distant sister and said into the night, "Hail, Witch-Queen of Aglarond!"

*Hello yourself, Witch of Shadowdale, came an answer. Storm and Lustra have been wondering where you've been these past months.*

"Trapped in an unwashed patch of hair on the head of a merchant wearing a magic-dead ring for fear of Lustra coming down on him in her full fury. It got so I wasn't just talking to myself—I was arguing with myself."

*Ugh! Those things should be destroyed. I've even caught a pair of Tashlutans—hired by our friends from Thay, of course—sneaking into my court with a pair of them that generate a reciprocating field between them. Pity their greed took their ring-hands into the path of a spill of molten gold being poured in one of the crafter's shops. Oh . . . winning those arguments with yourself, I hope. What sparks your plaintive cry this fair evening, sister?*

"The usual need to save all fair Faerun and everything in it, Lassra. I'm trapped in some bathwater—treated with a liberal dose of dissolved horse dung, so bring gloves—because our villain finally did a thorough job of washing his hair. He's shivering in his bed right now. Want to come to Neverwinter and warm him up?"

*Neverwinter? Does it have Red Wizards I can torment?*

"No, but this man is linked in a magical cycle to an umber hulk and *three* Red Wizards. That should satisfy even someone as greedy as you."

*A-hunting Red Wizards? Leave it to me.*

"Touch my stone and I'll give you all I know about our foes in one mindburst."

*You're a gem, Sylune. Constrained against the Art for months? I'd have gone utterly and eternally insane.*

"Others of my sisters have vigor, and low contacts across Faerun, and a love of danger. I have something rarer: patience."

*While I have a hunger to kill Red Wizards.*

Erovas Vrakenntun rubbed weary eyes and glared again at the window. Like the rest of the near neighbors of Blandras Nuin, he'd been unexpectedly entertained all night long. The hitherto quiet abode of a cloth merchant known for his kindnesses and solitude had provided a free spectacle that Erovas was heartily sick of.

Bloodcurdling, deafening shrieks, shouts and tavern oaths, and things breaking had been a damned near constant chorus—punctuated by displays of clothes thrown out windows, nude women plunging out of the house and running shrieking across the garden, and now, what looked like ghosts flitting past the windows. By the Untold Trembling Mysteries of Mystra, 'twas enough to make a—

His eyes widened and his jaw dropped open. His favorite monocle fell unheeded from its perch, to swing and dangle at the end of its maroon ribbon. Erovas the decanter merchant swallowed loudly, and reached forward with the sleeve of his dressing gown to wipe a small smear away from his window.

Not a hundred paces away—if he'd been able to pace upward through the air along a steady ascendant, as if climbing a staircase that had never existed and certainly never would, if he had anything to say about it, to reach a point about fifty feet above the sill of his window—a nude woman was floating. A woman whose long legs, slender, spectacular figure, and truly remarkable, gently swirling hair made his own wife look like a rather squat and badly sculpted garden statue of the jauntily gnomish variety.

The woman was standing on empty air—nay, leaning at ease on empty air, as if against a sideboard—talking in amused tones and in a relaxed, gossipy manner with someone who wasn't there. She was glowing brightly, he could see right through her, and he could see *everything*—Erovas gulped—including the fact that her head, with that gorgeous hair, was floating a good three feet above those slender, moon-drenched shoulders.

There was a small squeaking sound beside him. Erovas jumped, and it was a few anxious seconds before he realized that the sound had come from his wife, who'd come softly up beside him to see what he was staring at. When, she'd seen it for herself, she'd crammed some knuckles into her mouth, and bitten down hard.

A scream erupted from somewhere nearby, echoing around the dark houses, and the ghostly woman looked down and gave them a cheerful wave. Something inside Erovas the decanter merchant snapped.

"Right, that's it," he said to his trembling wife in a voice of iron. She whirled around to stare up at him as if he were twelve feet tall, fully armored, and grimly drawing on huge spiked war gauntlets as he contemplated which heavy sword to snatch up for the ride into battle. "We're moving. First thing in the morning. I've always hated your cousin in Port Llast, but right now I could cheerfully kiss him—*and* his six fat, drooling sons. Come help me—with the packing."

The Simbul's newest bedchamber took the form of a tall, soaring cone, its walls covered with the polished, interlaced, and startlingly red scales of many red dragons who would never take wing again. A steady, spell-spun breeze rose to the unseen tip of the cone, carrying swirling smoke with it.

The smoke came from a merrily-blazing bonfire that was floating some dozen feet above the tiled, diamond-shaped central dance floor. Four women were lying or sprawling at ease in the air around it, floating with spellbooks open in front of them. From time to time, encountering particularly faint or smudged writings, one of the studying sorceresses would crook a finger, and a blazing log would drift out from the conflagration to hang obligingly near, where it could shed light but not flame where desired.

The bed that usually hung high in the center of the cone was now floating handy to one side, piled high with scrolls, grimoires, bookmarks, and plates of butterbread



biscuits. An unseen harp played very faint and gentle ballads in the background. The fire popped only in hushed tones, and did not spit sparks at all.

One of the floating women sat bolt upright, causing the others to look up, startled. The Simbul frowned but kept silent, nodding slightly from time to time, then slowly acquired a wolfish grin. "A-hunting Red Wizards? Leave it to me."

She was, suddenly, a small whirlwind of flame that outshone the fire, a whirlwind that spun dazzlingly into a rising spiral—and was just as suddenly gone.

The three remaining sorceresses looked at each other. Then two of them groaned in unison, and the third one asked in disbelief, "Again?"

## **The Simbul Wizard Hunting Season**

*In Thay they trust in their spells. They bluster overmuch, and fear too little. Yet I know how to make a Red Wizard go pale with but three words. All I need say is: "Summon the Simbul."*

Uldurn Maskovert  
from *A Trader from Telflamm:  
My Years Amid High-Heaped Gold*  
published circa the Year of the Prince

Out of the darkness, a clawlike hand dipped into dark waters at the bottom of an almost-empty metal bathtub, plucked up a tiny, dripping chip of stone, and juggled it to the sound of a chuckle that was not pleasant at all.

It was the space of a long-drawn, comfortable breath later when something in the depths of Blandras Nuin's bedchamber made a booming sound. There followed a triple crash, then the rising sound of a scream that grew markedly in volume. Its source, a naked man whose flesh was very red and whose body trailed countless tiny curls of smoke, burst out into the hallway, rebounded off the wall with his hair enthusiastically aflame, and sprinted for the bathroom.

The running man whooped into a fresh scream at the sight of his two servant maids floating in eerie, glowing splendor, upright and staring with their feet a good way off the floor. He tried to swerve or slow his onrushing progress, but succeeded only in another heavy collision with the wall. His howl of horror carried him through a bruising roll that took him past the floating women, but sent them tumbling about the hallway like spell-slowed juggler's balls.

Scrabbling to make the turn into the bath chamber, Auvrarn Labraster never saw the rolling wall of flame that thundered out of the bedchamber door and snarled hungrily along the hall after him, swallowing Nalambra and Karlæ as

it came. All he saw was his high-backed metal bathtub, filled to the brim with clear, clean water, gleaming in the moonlight that was flooding in the open window. Head blazing, he launched himself into a plunge.

His head struck the curving inside of the nearly empty tub with a solid gonging noise, and the rest of his body followed in an awkward somersault, dragging the tub over on its side. Filthy water raced through Labraster's sizzling hair as his head rang like a riven bell. His senses started to drift away from him.

The last thing he heard was hearty feminine laughter—the full-bodied, head-thrown-back guffawing that so few women allow themselves—and the rising crackle of consuming fire. In the roaring heart of those flames was a sphere of open air where no flames reached. They streamed around it, defining its walls, but the space within was as cool, and the air as fresh, as if there was nothing burning for miles, and the gentlest of breezes was wafting over a pleasant meadow.

Three women hung in the heart of this little refuge. Two of them had been jolted awake into trembling terror, to find themselves floating in the air amidst an inferno that had only touched them enough to leave wisps of smoke from their scorched hair drifting about their shoulders. Speechless in amazement and fear, they stared dumbly at the third woman.

She was a tall, slender figure in a long, close-fitting gown that descended to her ankles and rose into a high collar. Her boots were of gleaming black leather, capped at heel and toe with gold. The sleeves of her gown flared from the elbow, and they rippled as she lifted a hand that bore several rings to shape an almost careless gesture in the air. She had long, wild silver hair that curled around her in endless, restless streams, like waves breaking on a beach, and here and there among its silken sweep, rings gleamed, securely entwined in the tresses. The wild disorder of her

hair was echoed in the careless gape of her gown, that laid bare her front from throat down to where the garment drew in to hold her breasts. She wore, it could be seen, nothing under the gown.

Her eyes were two dancing flames of fearless, reckless amusement. They held the gazes of both Nalambra and Karlae at once, and though neither maid could have said then or later what color those eyes were, they knew somehow that this woman would hurl danger all about them and all the world without warning—and often did so—but that they were safe from her.

They stared at her in wonder as the flames roared on around them all, consuming the house of Blandras Nuin. From somewhere nearby came the crash of a falling beam, the hissing of a cistern boiling away, then more crashes. The sorceress in the dark gown wove another spell, her body moving in the air with wild, sensuous grace, and smiled at Nalambra and Karlae.

They hung trembling, not daring to think what might now befall—then, of course, it did. Flames smote them with a deafening bellow, and the maids were hurled helplessly up through the air, soaring high in the star-strewn night sky as the house exploded in a huge fireball beneath them.

Nalambra and Karlae found breath enough for fresh shrieks of terror as they tumbled into an ever-quickenening descent, realizing numbly that they were going to die.

That cold and terrifying knowing froze their hearts and minds throughout their whirling descent down, down to soft, seated landings on the stone bench at the far end of the ember-strewn garden. As its cold stone shocked their bare thighs, and heaps of their own clothing spun out of nowhere to fill their laps, they had a brief glimpse of a dark-gowned figure standing in front of them, tiny lightning coiling and darting around her slender, uplifted arms. The lightning filled the cupped palms of the sorceress, there was a flash,

and Nalambra and Karlæ were blinking at the empty night in front of them.

The woman with the smile like a wolf was gone.

The palace that crowns the hill above Velprintalar is a slender-towered castle of green stone, beautiful to look upon. Most citizens of Aglarond gaze upon it from a safe distance, and take comfort in its reminder of the mighty magic that shields them against the dark and greedy grasp of Thay. A few have the boldness or business needs to venture into it, and most such penetrate only so far as a particular, memorable chamber.

It can be found not far beyond the darkly soaring forechamber of the palace, an audience chamber, one of nearly a dozen rooms in several buildings in the vicinity of Velprintalar that can be described as a throne room. This one was to the smaller, plainer end of Aglarond's array of throne rooms. Its walls were flame-gleaming sheets of burnished copper, and its floor a smooth expanse of scarlet tile broken only by the dark needle of an obsidian and cast metal throne that rose in dark, many-curved, irregular splendor like a watchful open hand, facing the distant entry door. A few chairs floated about this chamber, and a few plants also hung from nothing within its walls, their fronds trailing down gently as they drifted idly about. Something had caused them to cluster near the front right corner of the room this day, as the duty sorceress and the door steward sat in gently-wandering chairs and chatted, keeping within easy hearing of each other by the mage keeping one slippered foot hooked on the hilt of the steward's extended, scabbarded sword.

A dark and familiar figure appeared in the air nearby, descending to the tiles with a thump. The sorceress and the steward rose hastily to attention, but the Simbul paid them no heed. She was staring into nothingness and nodding slightly. After a moment she smiled and said, "Thank you,

sister. May your city and the realm rising around it both prosper. Hesitate not to call on me if you have need."

She brought her gaze down to focus on them both, and murmured, "Roeblen, Azmyrandyr, and Thaltar. Three scores to settle, and time to teach Thay the lesson once more that a little mastery of magic and a lot of arrogance do not give one any right, divine or otherwise, to rule all Toril—or even a small corner of Faerun."

She opened her clenched hand, and the sorceress and the steward saw a tiny chip of stone riding in her palm. The queen of Aglarond looked down at it and chuckled. "Well of course I'm different. Gentle prudence governs my every imperial act."

She turned and set the chip of stone carefully on the seat cushions of her throne. "Undignified," she told it, "but I need you to be where they'll sit on you from time to time—and always when there feeling most regal and headstrong. Help them only if you feel they need it. You can be most useful to us all if they don't suspect your presence for as long as possible."

The stone under her fingers hummed, and her smile broadened. "Why, with pleasure, sister dear, and I'll tell Elminster you charged me to do it, too!"

The Simbul gave the stone a gentle pat and turned away to face the sorceress and the steward. Her boots moved with uncanny silence, their soles walking on air a finger's width or so above the tile.

"Well met this fair evening," she greeted the two, a customarily imperious tone returning to her voice. "I need haste in this, so both of you go, and escort Evenyl, Thorneira, Phaeldara, and the Masked One hence. I've already mindspoken them to spare embarrassments, delays for dressing, and the like. Evenyl is down in the city, the Masked One will appear shortly in the Twilight Chamber, and the other two are in their apartments here. Go."

She gave them a gentle smile of dismissal and turned back to her throne, which began to wriggle and shake. Curved doors popped open and trays thrust forth. Humming, the queen of Aglarond selected several wands and scepters from the compartments, but the duty sorceress and the steward did not tarry to watch. They exchanged grim glances and a hug that failed to confer the reassurance it was meant to before they parted. The uncomfortable fear was growing in them both that this was one of those times when there was a real risk that fair Aglarond would soon be left undefended against the enraged survivors of a ravaged Thay. That jaunty humming of sad old ballads meant only one thing. In earnest, and uncaring of her own safety, the Simbul was truly going to war.

The fiery-haired, impish sorceress that some in Velprintalar call "the Small Fury"—the queen, of course, being the larger one—was the first to enter the audience chamber, striding in without ceremony. She was barefoot and tousle-haired, more or less wearing the first gown she'd had at hand to pull on, which happened to be the same rumpled one the captain of the palace guard had laughingly helped her to remove not long before. She'd curtly ordered away his hairy, fumbling hands as he tried to help her lace up and adjust this and shake out that, and told him that finding his own uniform, in all haste, might be a wise act. Roused and unsatisfied, she was not in the best of humors. This had better not be just another of the Simbul's wild whims....

Thorneira Thalance tossed her head back as her determined march along the warm tile brought her near the throne. As she slowed, she lifted her eyes for the first time, nostrils flaring in fresh irritation. Three dawn-to-lastcandle days of spell weaving, *three days*, and now the queen had to pull th—

Thorneira saw what loomed before her, and screamed. Her cry was echoed from the door behind her. Phaeldara,

too, was staring at the thing in front of the throne. It stood ten feet tall or more, a toadlike, glimmer-eyed mass of loose, billowing gray- and pink-streaked flesh. Five or six eel-like limbs were plunging busily among its folds, stuffing wands and scepters and small, hovering pouches of spell components—which it snatched in curving tentacles, like an octopus—out of sight inside itself, or rather, inside pouches of flesh that were opening like obscenely gaping wounds all over its wriggling body.

Thorneira raised her hands, not quite knowing what spell to hurl, and one large, dark toad eye expanded and split at the same time, receding like an opening iris to reveal the familiar face of the Simbul inside, her hair writhing around her in all directions in a dark, fleshy tent within the monstrous mass, as the silvery tresses manipulated the rippling movements of the sagging, toadlike body.

"Oh, you'll do fine," the Witch-Queen of Aglarond said sarcastically. "I call you here to take the throne while I flit away on a brief pleasure excursion, and you scream at the very sight of me then hesitate—*hesitate*, when Red Wizards could be slashing at the very heart of the realm with their spells—as to which spell you should use to trash my throne room!"

"I—ah—Great Lady—" Thorneira stammered, face flaming.

The Simbul winked, laughed heartily, and shot forth a tentacle to give the Small Fury an affectionate slap. "I'm sorry I startled you. I'll be done in a moment. Phaeldara, put away that wand."

The two summoned sorceresses relaxed, sinking into seats with identical sighs of mingled relief and exasperation, as the misshapen mound of flesh before them dwindled, roiled, tightened, then faded down to a more familiar form. The Witch-Queen of Aglarond stood before them, in a dark, bulging garment that looked like a second skin—that is, like the skin of some leathery beast that carried things about in



a series of bulging pouches made of its own hide, and had decided to mate its flesh with the head and upright bipedal shape of the Simbul. She grinned at them, and struck a pose with a hand on her hip.

"Going hunting?" Phaeldara asked with a smile, the gems in her dark purple hair gleaming in the glow from the ceiling. The Simbul winked.

"Red Wizards, of course," Thorneira put in. Her queen pouted.

"Am I so predictable?" she cried, in mock sorrow. "Does Aglarond offer such limited opportunities?"

"For magical mayhem to the point of spellstorms, yes," came a dry voice from the doorway. The Masked One had arrived, her face hidden as always behind a fantastical mask. This one was long, narrow, and curved, resembling the mandibled head of a giant beetle. Its metal shone with a glass-green hue, and the silver runes that mounted its center caught and held all eyes that strayed to them; a useful thing if those eyes should belong to an armed foe. A magic of clinging mists eddied teasingly around the full, floor-sweeping dark blue state gown the sorceress wore beneath the helmlike mask. The bodice of the gown was unseen beneath a pectoral of polished metal plates attached to the bottom of the mask; similar tongues of flexible metal cloaked the Masked One's shoulders and upper back.

"By Mystra's vigilance, don't you get hot under all that?" Thorneira murmured.

"Yes," the Masked One replied cheerfully, as a small commotion at the door behind her announced the breathless arrival of the last of the four summoned sorceresses. Evenyl gave them all a little smile and a wave as she gasped. The Simbul nodded and stepped forward.

"I'm off to hunt Red Wizards—particular and not very exalted ones, so a few zulkirs may find unmolested time and personal stupidity enough to strike out at Aglarond while I'm away. I don't plan to be long, but for me plans always fall

before whims, of course. Try not to lose the realm while I'm gone." The queen gave them all a wolflike smile, and lifted her hands to begin a spell.

"What should we do?" Phaeldara asked quickly. "I mean . . ." she gestured toward the throne.

The Simbul shrugged. "Take turns sitting on it. Pull each other's hair, have spitting contests, try jumping over more prone courtiers than each other—determine who rules however you please, or just take it in shifts. You're all capable enough. See how you take to commanding without any warning. I'm off!"

Those last two words were almost a shout of glee. In silence the four sorceresses watched their queen become a whirlwind of darkness, a spinning net of golden sparks that quickened into a high-singing blur, then a puff of fading, drifting purple cloud that rolled past Thorneira's shoulder before it was entirely gone.

The last of the sorceresses to arrive looked at the empty throne and shivered. "Sometimes I wonder just how strong her sanity really is," Evenyl said softly. "She scares me."

"Thankfully for us all," the Masked One said gravely. "She scares the Red Wizards far more."

They all nodded soberly, then, one by one, looked at the waiting, beckoning throne. None of them made a move to go and sit on it.

The man seated at the black table wore garments of black and silver. One of his arms seemed to be more a thing of bladed metal below his elbow than an arm grasping the hilt of a blade whose upper works coiled around and caged his arm.

Spread out on the table in a careful array were cards, large, long and narrow plaques that seemed to be sheets of thin, polished quartz or some sort of ice hued, translucent stone, each one different. Their varicolored faces glowed and pulsed, seeming to respond in a quickening, dancing white fire as the man reached across them to touch one of the

slender, spirelike pieces that stood here and there about the table. He moved it with all the care of a chess player, setting it down with a slow frown of consideration. In response, a line of flashing fire rippled across the cards.

It looked like a game of solitaire using enchanted cards and tokens, but at least one of those watching knew it to be magic as old as Netheril. "Table magic," some called it, but that was akin to a tutor one of the watchers had once overheard at Bonskil's Academy in Telflamm describing swordplay as "hitting sharpened sticks of metal together in opposition."

The man at the table moved another piece. It's something he'd never have done if he'd known anyone—anyone at all—was watching.

If he'd known just who was watching, and why, he'd have fled screaming from the room.

Irlmarren watched the cards flash as fingers gloved in black and silver moved another piece, and felt fresh excitement stir within him. If only he could obtain some of those plaques, somehow, and the vedarren—he knew, now, that the pieces that glowed were "vedarren." The "gult," the ones that were always dark, were simply pieces of particular sorts of stone that dampened and bent magical flows to serve as anchors for the spells being built. He could make his own gult, but each vedarren, it seemed, needed an imprisoned life—of a creature that could work magic—within it, to awaken its glow. Learning how to make those might take a lifetime, might even be something forgotten by the spellcasters of today. He must seize some vedarren, somehow. It would be best if no one knew he'd taken them, and came howling at his heels for their return. He would need time to master them, time undisturbed and in hiding, as this adventurer so foolishly assumed he was.

Irlmarren itched to touch, hold, and handle those plaques. If only he could work with them, experimenting

alone as this man in the depths of his crystal ball was doing, long enough to learn to build many-layered enchantments.

He understood, now, why Halruaa had never fallen. Even all eight zulkirs standing together—and he could not think of anything beyond the rage of a revealed god that could make any eight zulkirs stand together—would hesitate in the face of spells built like this. A single table magic, if it was intricate enough and unflawed, could lash out like the spells of a dozen arch-wizards acting at once. Some would even outlast their first awakening, and respond to what had aroused them to lash out anew in specific, aimed ways. As many as seven of these could be hung on the edge of being unleashed, carried unseen and untouchable—so long as their tables, hidden elsewhere, remained undisturbed—as single words or symbols in a caster's mind, or in an innocent-looking bone token or earring.

If he could build enough of these, a zulkirate could be his. He could rule in Thay, he could build an empire, he could send mountains marching west to roll over Aglarond and fill in long reaches of sea and make Thay itself larger. Why, he could ... wait for the treachery that was sure to unseat him.

Fresh fear stirred cold fingers along Irlmarren's spine. He'd found this man, a minor mage rumbling with things stolen from a tower in Halruaa, but still too well guarded for Irlmarren of Tyraturos to hope to reach, let alone overcome.

There must be scores—could well be hundreds—of mages in Halruaa who could work table magics as swiftly and deftly as a marketplace juggler. Hadn't he seen bone necklaces and pectorals and earrings in plenty in the depths of his crystal ball on the bodies of alert and ruthless Rashemaar witches? Who was to say the Witch-Queen of Aglarond herself didn't play with vedarren and plaques in hidden chambers?

Hmmm. That might well help to explain why the zulkirs never sent more than ambitious underlings, beasts, and

sword-swinging armies against Aglarond. Irlmarren of Tyraturos sat back and sighed, letting his eyes wander from the glowing scene in the depths of his crystal. He was going to have to think about this. The world had suddenly become a darker, more complicated place.

"Go right ahead and ponder, idiot," murmured a man in another darkened room with a crystal ball.

He smiled a mirthless smile, then turned and grinned at himself in a nearby mirror. It reflected back a man in robes of purple, whose hair and beard were oiled and cut to razor sharp edges, a man whose thick, powerful fingers made a rude gesture to his reflection and grinned more broadly when it did the same to him.

Roeblen of Bezantur looked back at the crystal ball glowing before him, and smiled again at the thought of just how useful his trapped crystal balls were turning out to be. Whether looking in at what their user was spying on, or looking out to spy on that user, just two had brought him hours of entertainment and enlightenment in but a handful of days.

Azmyrandyr's gaunt, scar-faced apprentice Stilard was planning to betray his master. Why else would he aid a doppelganger in his private quarters in repeatedly assuming Azmyrandyr's shape, then ask it to become a truly spectacular woman, and bed it? Now this.

Nasty little betrayals were just part of being a Red Wizard, and foreknowledge of them the weapons one simply collected whenever possible, and used whenever they'd best serve. This glimpse of—table magic, was it?—was important. Too important to let an over-impatient idiot like Irlmarren blunder about with, and inevitably reveal everything to a zulkir before Roeblen or anyone else could gain anything useful out of it. The power to effortlessly win a duel with any rival Red Wizard, for instance, or any two rival Red Wizards. Or, for that matter, any three.. ..

"My, my, Roeblen," murmured a woman whose silver hair slithered around her restlessly as she floated in the dark depths of a dry, disused well somewhere in the uplands of Thay, looking into a scene that glowed and flickered between her two cupped hands, "you haven't changed a bit."

The Simbul shook her head disgustedly, and did something with one of her hands. "The implications of something as simple as a trapped scrying crystal seem to be almost beyond you, let alone as powerful a toy as what you two worms have stumbled upon. I don't think we want a nation driven by cruelty, slavery, and a love of magic used to tyrannize, coerce, and destroy to have such power in its hands. Thayans tend only to see things of power as weapons."

Two distant wizards sat bolt upright, mouths falling open in horror, as those coolly-spoken words echoed in their heads. "Wherefore," she added, "and regrettably,..."

Silver tresses did something, a pulse of deadly force flashed through the mind of a Chosen, and two wizards gasped in unison as their eyes went dark and tiny threads of smoke curled up out of their ears.

"Farewell," the Witch-Queen of Aglarond said, in a voice dark with doom. Two crystal balls exploded in bursts of flame, beheading both Irlmarren of Tyraturos and Roeblen of Bezantur in identical storms of glassy shards.

The first rays of real dawn were touching the tops of the olive trees on the hill outside the fortress wall. They were rich plantings, but it was time they were culled. He'd see to that soon. Right after he saw to the culling of his apprentices.

Azmyrandyr stifled a yawn, saw Orth do the same, and said sharply, "We're almost done here. Rildar, shape Taramont again."

The gaunt, black-bearded apprentice grimaced only for the briefest of moments as he stood up, shook out his

sleeves, raised his hands carefully, and cast a spell of great length and intricacy.

He was operating at the very limits of his powers, and Azmyrandyr studied him with narrowed eyes. As it was, these four—the weakest of his apprentices, the only ones he dared trust outside Thay with some power in their hands—could only hold their disguises for a matter of hours, but they had to learn to move and speak like the people they were to supplant: the Lord of Nimpeth and his three chancellors.

Ilder Taramont was the "Admiral" of that wine-soaked city of slavers, a one-time adventurer whose thefts and subterfuges had won him infamy before the ascension of Lord Woren. He'd had to learn how to captain ships and move them like weapons, instead of merely stealing from their crews in passing. By all accounts, and by the signs Azmyrandyr could see through farscrying, Taramont was a quick-witted, subtle man. Rildar, regrettably, was not.

Azmyrandyr folded his arms, glanced out the window again, then noticed moon-faced Orth was almost asleep, his eyes vacant, his chin nodding. "Orth," he said pleasantly, "get down on your knees. You'll be a sailor—whom the Admiral is displeased with—scrubbing the decks. No, there's no need to take on a shape, just get down."

Rilder was now a shorter man, with a cruel, thin-lipped mouth, black hair beginning to go white at the temples, and sharp features. "And how is this, dog?" he demanded, in a high, sharp voice. "Have we so far descen—"

Azmyrandyr lifted a hand, "Stop," he said flatly. "The voice is right, but Vilhonna don't call each other 'dog.' Short, clipped sentences for the Admiral, one word replies whenever possible. Likes to hiss things, remember? A casual derisive term here would be 'dung turtle.' Try it again."

The cruel mage put his toes into the backside of the kneeling man. All four of the apprentices were barefoot, wearing only loose robes to avoid being harmed, or wasting

clothing, in their transformations. "What's this, dung turtle? This deck was claimed clean not very long ago. Has the word 'honesty' any meaning for you? Eh, now?" Azmyrandyr nodded. "Passable, but remember not to overuse that 'eh, now?' If the man knew it was his catch-phrase he'd cut back on it, right? Well, he couldn't help but know it if he repeated it every six sentences. And a little too formal, there. Not 'Has the word honesty any meaning for you?' but rather, 'Honesty mean nothing to you?' Taramont would say it the way you did when ridiculing an important merchant of Nimpeth, but not a sailor or an underling."

He looked down and added in dry tones, "Very well done, Orth, acted superbly."

Everyone—even the sleepy apprentice on the floor—chuckled, and Azmyrandyr drew in a deep breath, threw his head back, and said, "Well, now, Burgel, let's see your Noster. Coming to me, an important merchant whom you don't want to be too rude to, to advise me in a friendly but low-voiced way that I'd best stop being interested in ... whatever I'm too interested in. You want me to see that you're trying not to be overheard by others—for my own protection, of course."

Another of the apprentices got up from his chair, a shade less reluctantly than Rilder had, and paced forward.

Azmyrandyr turned his head sharply. "Rilder! Did I say to relax? Watch and keep silent, by all means, but watch as *Ilder Taramont*. Stand as he does, fidget as he does, scratch your nose and behind as he does, not as an overtired Rilder Surtlash does."

"Oh, Azmyrandyr! Give the lad some grace, will you? He can't help being a frightened idiot serving a master too stupid to be frightened, now can he?"

That jovial female voice snapped four heads up as if it had been a slaver's lash. Its owner gave them all a wide, affectionate smile before she blew them a kiss—the kiss that triggered the waiting spells that doomed them all.



A gray smoke seemed to pass over the window outside, and three swarms of magic missiles burst forth from the empty air behind the Thayans. Two of the apprentices died without ever seeing the bolts that slew them.

If Orth had been a slimmer man, he'd have been bowled off his feet by Burgel's dying fall, but he staggered, screeched in alarm and pain as blue-white bolts seared into him, and caught at a chair, gathering himself enough to snarl out his own magic missile spell.

Rilder went white to the lips in fear—the bloody Witch-Queen of Aglarond, laughing at them as she cast *how* many spells at once?—but he managed to stammer out the most powerful battle spell he had. Perhaps she'd never heard of a spectral axe, and he could get a good chance at her while she fought the others.

Azmyrandyr was the most fearful of all the Thayans, for he knew better than the others what they faced. That had been one of her spell triggers, and there was some sort of barrier all around them now, outside the room. Three swarms of spellbolts—four spells at once, and how many more triggers might she have? It was a slim chance, but his only one right now, given the cursedly paltry spells left to him. He raised his hands and tried to disintegrate the legendary Queen of Aglarond, knowing he would fail.

The silver-haired sorceress dropped her eyelids lazily and leaned her chin onto one hand in an insolent pose, smiling lazily at Azmyrandyr. "*You're* the one I've come for," she said, in the manner of a high-coin lass taking the hand of her patron at a revel.

She's laughing at me, Azmyrandyr thought. The bitch is laughing at me!

Azmyrandyr's sudden flare of rage was white-hot, and left him snarling in wordless fury as Orth's missiles struck ruthlessly . . . and seemed to do nothing. All gods above, was she immune to everything?

As if she could read his mind, the Simbul stretched like a lazy cat, and lifted sardonic eyebrows as she gazed coldly and amusedly into his eyes.

Azmyrandyr lifted his hands to smash her into oblivion, and realized that all he had left were the magic missiles she seemed immune to. He clapped one hand over the ring he wore on the other, and cried aloud, "Aid! We are beset by a sorceress! Aid in the West Tower!"

The ring winked into life under his fingers, a ruby flame welling up.

Azmyrandyr had once seen a zulkir employ the gesture and the murmured word the Simbul used then, and all hope drained out of him in an instant. Her eyes had been on him. The tingling was taking hold of him. Azmyrandyr of the Twelve Talons was the target of her skeletal deliquescence.

Deep within himself, Azmyrandyr heard the ring send his plea for aid rolling out, but it seemed to pass into hushed silence not far beyond the walls and floor. That cursed barrier, no doubt, but even if magic was blocked hadn't they yet made simple noise enough in the fray for the priests in the chapel below, preaching dawnrise to the rest of the apprentices, to hear?

"*Aid!*" he roared, as loudly as he could, not caring if his voice broke raw. After all, how much longer would he have to use it?

It was beginning already. Through a gathering red haze Azmyrandyr saw Rilder's spectral axe swoop down and hack, hard, right into the Simbul's face. It flashed right through her, as if she were no more than a ghost. Of course, the bitch would have an ironguard up, but wait, wasn't the axe no more than a blade of spell force, and not metal at all? That must mean—

The groan and shiver that would be his last rose up in Azmyrandyr, his throat and nostrils collapsed, and he could speak no more, could barely think as the shuddering began. Of course, he thought dazedly as he began to fall, that was

why the missiles struck the apprentices from behind, not from her at all... .

The last thing Azmyrandyr of the Twelve Talons ever properly heard, through the rising, surflike surging in his ears, was the thunder of running, booted feet. He seized on the satisfaction that brought, wrapping himself in the thought that either the insolent Witch-Queen of Aglarond would take real harm this day, overwhelmed by foes, or he'd not fall alone, while others lived on to take this his fortress and lord it here over his bones.

Not that he had any of *those* left, now.

Rilder frowned, in real puzzlement as well as growing alarm and fury. The sorceress was casting a magic missile spell as calmly as if she were standing at home, alone in a practice chamber. All the while his axe was racing through her, circling with all the speed he could urge it to, and cleaving down again, biting right through her, and being ignored. How could this be?

How by dark, soul-chilling kisses of Shar, Lady of the Night, could this bloody well be?

He didn't realize that he'd snarled that aloud until he heard her laugh. Strangely, that laughter seemed to come from right behind him.

That meant... that meant... well, it meant something, but the thought was lost to Rilder as his master Azmyrandyr—hard and cruel indeed, but a pillar of dark strength that somehow Rilder would have never expected to see topple—slumped into a boneless, spreading puddle of flesh in front of him, flowing greasily out across the floor in front of Rilder's toes.

The apprentice was already drawing back in mounting disgust—his flowing master was *warm*—when he saw that his racing axe was going to cleave right through the central, sinking lump that had been Azmyrandyr. His master was collapsing, yes, but not collapsing quite fast enough to avoid—

Rilder winced as his conjured weapon slashed through the flowing thing, cutting a deep channel. Blood, and other wet, bubbling substances started to well up in its wake. A severed hand, still recognizable from the winking ring despite its long, trailing sausages of fingers, tumbled away.

Rilder was desperately trying to be sick all over the spreading mass of his master when a volley of blue-white bolts tore through him from behind. Things changed for Rilder Palengerrast in that instant. It was no longer necessary for him to vomit if he wanted to spatter the chamber in front of him with all that had once been inside Azmyrandyr's most loyal apprentice. He fell forward, never knowing that he was doing so.

"Sweet Shar preserve us!" one of the two running apprentices gasped. All that was still whole of Rilder were his toppling legs. What flopped bloodily above that was torn into more holes than a sponge. Small stars marked more tiny, fist-sized explosions as the stupidest apprentice fell.

"Must've ... been carrying ... feather tokens ... or the like," the other apprentice husked out, becoming uncomfortably aware that he was completely out of breath to cast spells, as they came rushing down on a woman he'd never seen before but had an uncomfortable feeling he knew from her swirling silver hair. She'd been calmly standing behind Rilder, and had now turned her head to smile at them both over one shoulder.

The apprentices crashed to a hasty, unsteady halt. "Holy Shar, be with us now!" the first apprentice whispered, and for perhaps the first time in his life, truly meant it.

The other apprentice spun on his heel and pelted right back down the passageway they'd sprinted up, weaving desperately from side to side. "I'll raise the alarm!" he shouted back, in case Marlus was so angry at being left alone to face the legendary Simbul that he turned and fed a burst of spellbolts to his colleague.

Marlus, however, was too busy recognizing the spell that the sorceress was casting, and throwing himself flat on his face, to be angry about anything.

"Behold your alarm," the Simbul remarked pleasantly, then lifted a surprisingly pleasant singing voice into a little ditty "Come one, come all, to the murderous ball.. ."

The fireball that crisped fleeing Ilnabbath shook the fortress and sent tongues of hot flame over his head, but Marlus rolled onto his side the moment it was done and calmly cast the spell he'd been saving for Ilnabbath, later: feeblemind.

His reward, as he scrambled up to watch the sorceress start to drool, was a look of withering contempt from the Witch-Queen of Aglarond. This seemed like a good time to gulp in despair, so Marlus Belraeblood did so.

Temple Master Maeldur stepped back hastily and threw up a hand to shield his eyes. "A fireball? This is more than an apprentice trying to fell his master! Go you, Staenyn, to rouse our visitors. One of them at least outstrips Master Azmyrandyr in the Art. Hurry back, I may well need you!"

He slapped at the fortress guards trying to shoulder past. "Hold! Let me cast some protections on you. Yon's a sorceress of some power."

"I'm growing impatient," the Witch-Queen of Aglarond called, watching the puddle that was Azmyrandyr grow broader and shallower. "Give me battle, worms of Thay!"

She chuckled, and added, "Ah, but I sound like a hero in a bard's ballad. Time to singe that priest down there."

Some called them magic missiles, others knew them as spellbolts. They were swift, and—surprisingly often—deadly enough to be all that was needed. She called up a swarm of them, and fed half to the fool of a mageling who'd tried to feeblemind her, who was now determined to prove his foolishness beyond all doubts by charging up to her alone, and the other half to the priest shouting at the armsmen,

with all of them clustered together down the far end of the passageway.

She watched them both stagger, but neither fell. Ah, at last! A chance for a real fight. She might get to punch a Thayan, or trade dagger thrusts, and taste real blood.

She shrugged, and took firm hold of her rising blood-lust. That would be fun, yes, prudent, no. In this land of her foes she must strike hard and move on swiftly, before some zulkir could flog two dozen Red Wizards into striking at her all at once. After all, she wanted to slay Red Wizards, not despoil the land of Thay and slaughter slaves by the fortress-full.

The Witch-Queen of Aglarond watched the mageling rush toward her and retreated a little way. It would not do to let him know too soon the true nature of the foe he was glaring at with such hatred, not when more Thayans would shortly be all around her.

The air all around her seemed to settle and shimmer. Small, dark objects coalesced out of nothingness on all sides. They were blades. It was a blade barrier!

As the cloud of deadly knives started to whirl around her, the Simbul saw the mageling stagger hastily back. Good. She stood her ground as the blades flashed and whirled, dicing to bloody hash underfoot the boneless puddle that was Azmyrandyr.

"Farewell," she told him mockingly, kneeling down to speak to a staring eyeball as it swirled past. "Only one left, now, of those who dared to strike at my sister in her own palace. You were such a poor challenge, O Azmyrandyr of the Twelve Talons, that I'll just have to send most of the magically adept—if that's not bestowing too generous a description—folk in your fortress after you into oblivion. Mystra knows, Alustriel's discomfort is worth far more than that."

She looked up, and gave the mageling cowering against the wall her best wolfish grin. This Sharran blade barrier was

going to save her a lot of blasting spells, and win her some fun at last. It was a good thing, she sometimes thought—and thought now—that these Thayans got so excited in spell battle. None of them had even noticed yet that they were hurling all their fury at a projected image. She had no fear that this spell would harm her real body, standing invisible nearby. Before going into battle here she'd exchanged her spell storing ring for the ironguard ring she now wore. The tress of hair that had carried the latter now held the former until she needed it again, one of many rings dancing about her in her restless hair, awaiting her need.

From the wall, the mageling hurled his own swarm of spellbolts at the Simbul. Ah, well, she could take a lot of those. Sooner or later some Thayan was going to realize she was immune, and spread the word, but that wouldn't happen until about the time they all learned to work together. In the century to come when that might occur, all of Faerun would have a lot more to worry about than one Chosen's spell immunities.

She sent a smile in the direction of the mageling's fearful face and carefully shaped one of her newer spells. "This," she announced to the gaping Marlus, "is a spell-snaring sphere. Pay attention, now."

Ignoring the battle cries and pounding of booted feet now storming up the passageway, the Simbul stepped back to the wall and spun the sphere around the priest's blade barrier. She strode forward again, into the heart of the whirling steel, to face the onrushing charge.

What she saw down the passageway made her laugh in bitter derision. The priest of Shar had come to a halt to watch the warriors he'd urged forward die. How valiant. How typically brave of clergy the world over.

Her eyes narrowed as the second priest came hurrying up to stand beside the first. His hands moved speedily through the motions of a spell she did not know. This could

be interesting. Well, it wasn't a battle if she didn't feel pain before it ended.

The armsmen were thundering at her with weapons raised, their armor glowing and sparking with feeble protective magics that just might carry them once through the raging knives of the blade barrier... or might not.

She danced from side to side, to keep her secret from that sharp-eyed mageling against the wall for as long as possible, as the warriors rushed at her and began to thrust and hack. Overhead, amid the whirling blades but seemingly unaffected, a dark cloud spun into being. She glanced up, and quickly back at the second priest. Yes, it was his doing. His eyes were intent upon it.

Armsmen grunted and shouted and swung swords. She ducked and danced and snarled at them, as if truly trying to dodge their steel, and looked back up at the low-hanging cloud—oho! This must be the Spider of Shar spell she'd heard of... yes, here came the "legs." It was a small forest of black tendrils. This would last for a while, whipping the mageling, herself, and the armsmen indiscriminately. They brought stinging pain, she'd heard, but she knew not how—precisely—they dealt damage.

One of the warriors grew impatient in his frustration. Why wouldn't this woman he was hacking fall? He put his head down and charged right through her, passing through her nothingness to crash and clang hard against the chamber wall. The Simbul saw the mageling's eyes narrow.

"Y-yyes!" he cried, pointing at her. "Yon's not the sorceress at all, but a—"

The black tendrils closed over his head and twisted it off.

The Witch-Queen of Aglarond whistled and swallowed, despite herself, as the headless, blood-pumping body staggered forward into the blades and began to slump into bloody nothingness under their butchery. So that was a Spider of Shar.



Tendrils were lashing through her phantom self in angry futility now, and she thought it prudent to stagger, look injured, and to flee—down the passageway, toward the priests—as swiftly as possible.

As she began her falsely unsteady journey, the warriors were making small whimpering sounds, wetter noises, and one or two short, desperate screams as the whirling blades penetrated their flickering, failing defensive magics. Even if one of the clergy tried to bring down the blade barrier now with quelling magic, her spellsnaring sphere would maintain it. She tugged on the sphere in her mind, sawing it from one side of the room—daggers snarled and rang sparks off the stone walls—to the other, where the song of tortured metal was repeated. Along the way, the moving blades brought final doom to the four armsmen dying in the heart of that whirlwind of steel.

Horrible things, blade barriers. Bloodletting waste, she thought, far more grisly than a good, clean fireball.

With that old and sarcastic wizards' dark joke twisting her lips, the Simbul brought the blade barrier through her phantom self. She gasped and flung up her arms in a fairly impressive feigning of fresh-wounded pain, and thrust it down the passage toward the two priests. Another pair of men had emerged into the far end of the passageway, far behind the priests, and at the sight of them, the Simbul acquired a smile that was even less pretty than the one she'd just been wearing.

Red Wizards, these two, or she'd eat all their fingers, with or without salt. One of them even wore the purple robes and red sash that puppeteers the world over used to let their audiences know "Red Wizard" in a glance.

Ah, now, perhaps this trip was going to be worth leaving a comfortable throne for, after all.

The whirling blades shrieked and snarled their way along the narrow passage, spitting shards and sparks in all directions. Had her real body not now been tucked prudently

into a corner of the chamber where apprentices had recently been acting the roles of the rulers of Nimpeth, the Queen of Aglarond might have suffered some real damage. As it was, she limped and lurched forward, her face a mask of pain as she clutched at nonexistent wounds in her phantom side, and tried to keep a grin from creeping onto her face as she watched the priests struggle with their obviously meager courage.

It didn't take long for one of them—the one who'd cast the spider spell—to whirl around and flee. The other one acquired a rather sick and wavering smile of confidence as he raised his hands into some rather frantic spell-casting and stood his ground, backing only a single step to strike a more dramatic pose.

The two Red Wizards had stopped to cast ironguard magics on themselves. They glanced down the passage calmly when they were done, then began to stroll unhurriedly toward the fray. Ah, Thayan arrogance.. ..

"The priest wasn't exaggerating after all," Largrond of the Lash remarked. "I must admit I *am* surprised."

"Not exaggerating?" Ylondan the Tall replied, lifting a hand to make sure his rings were gleaming in their accustomed places. "You think that staggering wreck is the Simbul?" He nodded his head in the direction of the wounded, staggering woman in the distance.

The priest Staenyn came panting past them, his eyes wild. He looked away hastily from the hard glares they gave him—and Ylondan thrust out a boot and tripped him. Staenyn fell hard, but they did not bother to look and see what he did after that.

"Well, whoever she may be," Largrond said with a cold smile, "our duty is clear."

"Yes," Ylondan agreed, glee making his voice rise into oily triumph. "Blast the bitch!"

As if in reply to this, Temple Master Maeldur emitted a brief, brutally cut off bubbling scream as the blades reached

him and did their bloody work.

"In case she should be an accomplished mage, and have some spells left," Largrond said, as the two Red Wizards strolled untouched through the shrieking, clanging blades, "I propose we take no chances. I shall cloak her in an anti-magic shell—and you can blast the ceiling above her. The old saying applies, you know."

"'Falling stones humble even the mightiest zulkir'—that one?" Ylondan replied, stepping around the diced carrion that had recently been a temple master of Shar without bothering to really look down, "Or do you mean the one about not hurling meteor swarms when a bolt of lightning will do?"

"The former," Largrond replied, not bothering to turn and look as the blade barrier met a Staenyn who was still groggily struggling to rise, and cut him to shrieking ribbons. "The other one presumes you know precisely what you're facing."

Ylondan swallowed. "I think I do," he said in a far quieter voice than before, as the blade barrier echoed its furious way on down the passage. His eyes were fixed on the woman they were now rapidly approaching, and his face had lost some of its usual color. "I saw the Simbul once, in battle against... oh, never mind."

He lifted his hands in sudden haste, and began to work a spell with hissing precision, moving his hands just as fast as the casting would allow. Largrond glanced at him, lifted one eyebrow, and matched his colleague's pace.

They were halfway through when the woman they were facing straightened up, crossed her arms over her breast in lazy condescension, and smilingly awaited their spells. Largrond almost faltered when the waiting woman began to laugh at them.

The Red Wizards finished their castings with identical sighs of relief, and Largrond's anti-magic shell promptly flickered into life. As it did so, the laughing sorceress winked

out of existence, her mirth cut off abruptly—an instant before the stony rubble crashed down.

"A projected image," Largrond groaned. His words heralded another instant, one in which the falling rubble was translocated onto the heads of the two Red Wizards. Sixty-odd stones that were each half the size of men slammed down to the passage floor amid a lot of lesser rubble, shaking the fortress, causing a partial collapse into the rooms on the floor below, and driving the dust of centuries into the air.

The real Simbul coughed delicately, stepped around the corner, and stood amid the carnage, dusting off her hands. "Stand together in a passageway discussing your tactics against a foe close enough to hear? Idiots," she muttered. "The likes of these want to rule Faerun? Better we give it to the orcs."

It had been a long and howling nightmare of pain, with much lying shivering on cold stone in utter darkness while half-cooked flesh that glistened and quivered like feast-day jelly shed the dark, dry ashes that had once been skin, and Auvrarn Labraster found new ways to scream.

Now the one who'd brought him here was back. Cool, soothing fingers had touched his eyeballs and banished the swimming haze that had cloaked them since the fire. A flood of sheer, shivering-cold pleasure had washed over Labraster from head to toe, banishing the worst of the pain and restoring to him skin that didn't crumble into ash or stick to anything it touched, and muscles that could move his limbs.

Those chilling but gentle fingers touched his throat. Auvrarn Labraster had a brief glimpse of a ring that looked like the iridescent husk of a long, green beetle, that covered the uppermost joint of a slender male human right hand, and glowed with a green light tinged around the edges with white. The glow extended only a little way, but it was enough to show him a rough, curving wall of stone around and above his head. He was, it seemed, lying in a cavern.

Labraster then discovered that he could swallow again, could taste something besides fire for the first time in what seemed like an eternity, and could, in fact, speak. He swallowed several times, trying to shape words through a mouth and throat that seemed horribly dry.

"I owe you my life, good sir," he husked, hearing a voice that at some moments seemed little more than a whistle, and little more than a raw, ragged rattle at others, "and wish to extend to you my thanks."

The response that came from almost directly above him—where the ring-wearer stood, his head beyond Labraster's field of view—was startling. The man with the cool fingers abruptly burst into a loud, canine barking.

That barking gave way to liquid laughter, too high and shrill to be comfortably sane, then an almost childlike giggle. It was followed by the calm, matter-of-fact words, "The plume the flagon, but there is in fact no palimpsest at twice the thalers," which in turn gave way to a howl, a rising run of ragged, frantic, and ever-faster panting, then, in a quite different, almost feminine voice: "Come to the stone, and feed."

Those cold hands touched him again, and again as the babbling and barking went on, Auvrarn Labraster lay on his back not daring to move or speak for fear of what those hands, so powerful in magic, might do.

Cold fear rose and danced in his breast and throat, making him sob almost frantically. The man who wore the green beetle ring seemed to grow angry, his yips and shouts rising to a crescendo, then, eerily, he fell utterly silent again.

The hands left him, the green-white glow fading, and time stretched. Labraster had just begun to hope the madman who'd restored him to health had departed when the same cold hands, without warning, touched his knee and the ankle below it.

It was all he could do to keep from jumping and letting out a shriek as the mysterious mage burst into incoherent

babbling above him again. Half words, or a fluid tongue that the trembling merchant did not know, gave way to speech startling in its calm clarity.

"There is no dark sun," said the man who wore the beetle ring, "but First-Speaker was even more wrong. Under the sea of sands they wait, beyond all vanquishing. The dragon stirs, but no sleepers wake. I see that throne emptied. It will all come again. I will be there. The whips of my faithful shall strike. The eyes of my devoted shall see. There is no doom to touch the darkness I can send. Rend the sacrifices. Rend them now."

The cold hands tightened. Somehow Labraster managed to keep silent, but he was shaking uncontrollably as the hands clutched him cruelly here, there, and all over. Silence fell again.

Auvrarn Labraster would have prayed fervently—though silently—then, if he'd had any idea which god he should be praying to. Whichever one, if any, who'd have him.

His healer paid him no heed, but threw back that unseen head and howled, the roar deafening in the small, echoing space. Labraster glanced down at himself in the din to make sure he hadn't been given wings, or a tail, or—no. The Waterdhavian who'd spent far too much time as Blandras Nuin closed his eyes firmly and lay back on the stone. If a god—whoever might hear—would just take all of this pain and confusion away. ...

A thought struck him that left him cold and cowering indeed. The hands were trailing up and down him again, seeming to caress rather than claw. What if they *were* the hands of a god?

"And what is your view, Thaltar?"

"Insofar as I'll admit to having formed one, Dlamaerztus, I think it important that all of you know that it's but an immediate reaction—a feeling in the gut, if you will—and not a reasoned and sustainable position."

"Wisdom of Mystra, man, this isn't a debating club," said a third mage at the table disgustedly, as he shook out his sleeves. Despite several hot glares, his next action was to unconcernedly take up his thin, foot-long cigar again from a holder on the shining wood before him that looked like what it was, a petrified human hand cupped eternally in a pose that allowed it to receive stray and weary cigars, pipes, and even writing quills. The mage blew a smoke ring as he sat back in his chair, with the air of a man exhausted from delivering a long and modestly brilliant speech.

"Norlarram," Dlamaerztus said testily, "I don't know why you attend these meetings, given the preparations and defenses we must all make, if you're not prepared to seriously discuss our unfolding plans. I know / don't attend for the pleasure of having you blow cigar smoke into my face all evening."

"No?" Norlarram of the Five Hungry Lightnings returned coolly, another smoke ring leaving his lips. "Why exactly do you attend these gatherings, then, Dlamur? Is it just to keep an eye on the rest of us without having to spend long afternoons casting eleven separate spying spells? I've awaited—nay, anticipated—the bright light of worthy verbal contributions on your part these past four meetings, as you've striven to chide and curb us as if we were children and you our teacher. I find myself, now, still waiting for that brilliance to shine upon us all."

The largest and fattest of the twelve robed men seated around the table rumbled into angry life. "This again! Look, everyone, as we are all Red Wizards, we must all know how to write, and read, and think. We all have ambition, or we'd not be here. We all have far too little time to spare for anything we look upon with pleasure. So I ask the table in general: must we listen, at our every gathering, to idle, cutting witticisms by men who think themselves clever?"

"Or complaints from men who think themselves wizards?" Norlarram asked his cigar in arch tones. Someone

snorted in mirth, a sound overridden by someone else's growl of anger.

"I can't see, try as I might, how this wrangling and stirring of ill feelings is going to ease—or even permit—our working together," Thaltar observed calmly. "Why don't we simply leave off speaking words clever or otherwise until Iyrtaryld describes his latest plan? I suspect it is more than just my own view that will be formed, or reshaped, in light of what he has to say."

"*Finally* something I can agree with," the fat wizard put in quickly. "Belt up, all of you, and give Iyrtaryld our silence to fill."

"With this, I find myself in agreement," a thin, pale wizard whose hair and brows were wintry white said then, turning eyes whose pupils were the yellow of buttercups to look up and down the table. "Give Taryld the floor."

A little silence fell, and into it a soft voice not heard before at this meeting said, "Ahem . . . well, now."

Its owner rose and looked coldly around the table. His beard thrust forth into Faerun like an up-curling spike from the point of his otherwise shaven chin, beneath eyes that glittered with malice and restless ambition. "I've worked out the last details of the enchantment that will enable one of us to pass on the burden to the next without letting the magic fall, and so keep the mouth extant as days pass. My trials suggest that the addition of this spell also mitigates any backlashes that may occur when the spell does fail."

"May occur? Were there not always backlashes at the end of the spell?" Norlarram asked quickly.

Iyrtaryld shrugged. "More than half the time, but not always."

"And when not, how so?"

"We could find no tactic in the use or handling of the spell to cause, steer, or prevent a backlash. The form, intensity, and even presence of this discharge seem truly random."



"So, behold then . . ." the always brisk—some would have said "impatient"—Dlamaerztus prompted.

Ilyrtaryld smiled, but no humor reached up to touch his eyes. "Behold, then," he said in coldly satisfied tones, "the Hungry Mouth."

Those last two words triggered an illusion spell the soft-voiced mage had prepared beforehand, showing them a whirling, moving oval construct in the air, a maw hovering above a field. Its compulsion was strong enough to suck up streams of sand and rock dust into itself, though, at a glance they seemed to be flowing the other way, drooling down out of the hungry mouth as it roved almost restlessly up and over a little rise. It drew several startled sheep into itself, whirling them away in a swift, blurred snatching.

"Vast herds of creatures, both wild and shepherded, roam the lands east of Raurin, and beyond that are realms both ancient and rich, whose folk are many. Shrewdly placed, our roving mouth can graze on these at will, delivering to us an endless supply of slaves. We can eat what can't be compelled to labor for us."

"Making us powerful indeed in Thay," one mage murmured.

"And hence, noticed and inevitably challenged," Norlarram said sharply. "Leaving us to pursue what plan?"

"I would know first," Thaltar put in smoothly, "what will occur if our mouth sucks up an unleashed spell—or a hostile mage able to cast many spells, commencing immediately?"

There was a general murmur, out of which the voice of Dlamaerztus rose like a trumpet. "So the naysayers begin to chisel away at this brightest of our dreams again, being anxious here and cautious there, querying and caviling, rushing ev—"

"In spellcrafting," the fat wizard said loudly, his voice rolling over the rising torrent of contesting voices like a great wave, "those who are not anxious, cautious, and querying are soon known as 'the dead.' "

— "Shadow of Shar!" someone snarled. "Are we to be list

There was a sudden groaning of grating, shifting stone, and the table in their midst heaved up into the air.

Wizards shouted and scrambled to find a grip on something or just to stay more or less upright as chairs tumbled and clattered, and the stone floor surged up in a gray wave before breaking into fragments.

A furious Dlamaerztus pointed at the fat mage and screamed, "Quaerlesz, this is *your* doing!" From his pointing finger sprang a sudden flurry of blue-white, streaking bolts.

Even as the spellbolts struck some sort of unseen barrier around Quaerlesz and burst into bright flares of nothingness, the air filled with deadly outbursts of slaying magic.

Cones, rays, and volleys of conjured bolts stabbed out, crisscrossing and annihilating each other amid tumbling showers and sprays of spell sparks. Red Wizards, it seemed, were a less than trusting breed.

In the heart of this magical conflagration, great stony fists—looking for all the world as if they were an outgrowth of the floor of fitted stone blocks—thrust up through the table, trailing splinters.

A head that had no features save a gaping slash of a mouth followed them into view as the room shook and shuddered, hurling the battling mages off their feet. As they rolled and sprang up and ran, the stony shoulders of the rising colossus heaved as its arms bent in huge, swinging punches—and crashed down through robes and the frantically-sprinting flesh beneath, dashing out screams and life together into bursts of blood. Crushed bodies splattered their innards over the cracking, tilting floor.

"Dlamaerztus," Thaltar gasped aloud, identifying the sleeve and convulsing hand protruding from one dark sea of blood. He turned his head, saw, and added in a voice only slightly unsteady, "Norlarram—and all his complaints."

Around him Red Wizards shouted and took stands, weaving spells in frantic haste. Those fists fell like hammers again, smashing fat Quaerlesz like an egg and narrowly missing Iyrtaryld. Thaltar saw the creator of the hungry mouth spell somersaulting helplessly through the air as the floor beneath his boots shattered under that ponderous blow.

It was methodically crushing wizards with its fists. Thin, pale Olorus was the next to fall, as the colossus ignored lightning playing around its bulk and spellbolts streaking into it.

Amid the screaming, Thaltar dodged a rolling piece of table, slipped and almost fell in the pool of gore spreading from the bloody pulp that had been Quaerlesz, and dodged past chairs dancing in the aftershocks of the latest blows. Riven wood, spilled blood, and desperately running men were everywhere.

A few frantic moments later, another blow fell—so close behind his heels that he felt the graze that peeled the leather of his left boot away from the skin beneath. Thaltar looked down at it as he staggered, fighting to regain his balance. That seemingly doomed struggle ended when he lurched against a doorframe.

He spun around and through the curtained doorway into the relative shelter of the chamber beyond. The black fire he'd called up flickered and spat around his fingers. It would take him but moments to finish the spell, spin around again, and shatter the magic that had given brief but deadly life to the colossus.

Thaltar lifted his eyes as the curtains swirled away, to make sure no menace within was waiting to attack him when he turned to strike down the colossus. Even a cowering guard with a dagger was deadly when driven to lash out at anything in wild fear.

Instead of a white-faced, staring armsman, he found himself face to face with Quaerlesz—standing whole and

unharmd in all his fat, side-whiskered magnificence. Their eyes met, and Thaltar smiled, nodded—and as the fists of the colossus thundered down again in the room behind him, said the last three words of the incantation as if they were a polite greeting.

For once he did not have to hurl the lance of black fire that formed between his cupped palms. It came into being with its tip only a finger's width from the false wizard's breast. When Thaltar willed it to strike, it burst right through the mage—almost *eagerly*.

As it was supposed to do, it left its black flame behind as it burst. The ravening flames raged briefly through a succession of magical shields surrounding the false Quaerlesz, but their owner merely murmured something that sounded almost calm from within the inferno.

Thaltar sprang back, seeking the edge of the archway with one outstretched hand, in case the murmuring was the weaving of a retaliatory spell he might be able to elude, and watched anxiously as black flames bit through a spell-spun disguise into the real body beneath. The real Quaerlesz was a sprawled mass of splintered bones, pulped flesh, and blood in the room behind him, so who was this?

It would almost have to be the caster of the colossus. An ambitious mage acting alone, or the agent of a zulkir? Was their hungry mouth scheme known to the truly powerful, or was this the first of their moots yon unknown foe had stumbled upon?

Thaltar put a hand to his sash and clamped his fingers onto a certain symbol emblazoned there. His lips could now unleash no less than six hanging battle spells, a single word for each, in case this foe should prove to be a mage still capable of magical battle. The dark flames were dying down, now.

Thaltar's eyes widened. Could it be? The blazing, collapsing body before him was sagging to its knees, scorched silver tresses of hair writhing and flailing it from

knees to elbows. Both body and hair were shuddering and twisting in pain, and this must be, could only be—

The Witch-Queen of Aglarond!

As more crackling, darkening hair fell away, Thaltar saw clearly the convulsed, agonized form within, and knew wildly rising excitement. More than satisfaction, this was triumph!

As the flames died away from everywhere but her throat, the Simbul stared at him, her face creased with pain. Speaking would be an agony for her. Speaking incantations correctly would have to be the reward of a fiercely fought victory over pain.

Thaltar was under no such hindrance. He hissed a certain word, then gave her a tight smile. The air around her was full of glistening, eel-like flying serpents, their fangs grotesque, curving things that slashed, struck, and whirled to slash again.

She covered her face with her hands, and Thaltar saw her body quiver as his cloud of fangs did its work. Some mages preferred variants that gave the air a swarm of bony, disembodied jaws, but this was, somehow, more impressive, more... satisfying.

Watching warily, the Red Wizard gave her a good long time to suffer, then said another word that brought a silvery sword fading into being, floating not far away in midair with no hand to wield it. A sword that moved by itself at his behest, and under his will turned its point a little to the left—and promptly thrust into her.

The Simbul stiffened as the sword faded away into drifting, dying sparks, its work done. Her tattered black gown was wet with dark blood in many places, now, and acquired the blue halo-glow that Thaltar had been awaiting. He almost gasped his relief aloud. The sword's gift, the halo was the visible manifestation of a lasting spell field she'd have to struggle against even to unleash the simplest spell.

She was his plaything, now, helpless meat on a swift road to death.

Behind Thaltar, in the shattered chamber where twelve proud and nigh-fearless Red Wizards had been sitting around a table such a short time ago, the colossus had fallen silent. Thaltar grinned, like a skull showing its teeth.

"So this is the mighty Simbul," he mocked her. "Oh, pray excuse me, most arrogant lady, *the* Simbul, of course."

She turned her back on him without a word or sound, and he felt exultation turning to rage. Thaltar Glaervar would break this bitch-queen, make her scream and sob and plead as she wept, on her knees and—but no. He'd not let anger master him. Careful and wary must be his way now, or he'd do something that would let her win free, to be his doom, now or in some day to come. He must be very careful.

Thaltar's next spell merely called a steel-barbed slave whip to his hand. He'd keep his attacks to the purely physical, and give her no chance to twist or send back his magic, or through it lash out with a spell of her own. He cast a quick glance behind him into the ruined meeting chamber, to make sure none of his fellow conspirators were creeping up behind him right now, but saw nothing there beyond death and destruction. The heavy silence of the dead ruled. If any of his colleagues lived, they lay senseless or had fled. His triumph would be a very private one, not something that would raise Thaltar Glaervar to fame, but not something that would make him a target for every wary zulkir or mage of Thay desiring an enhanced reputation, either.

He turned back, smiled at the huddled woman, and struck.

Had she been standing slightly differently than before, and looking a trifle different, too? No matter. The first bite of the long-spiked lash spun Thay's most hated foe around and tore down one of her arms, away from her face. Blood trailed from her trembling fingertips, and their eyes met, for just a moment.

"Long have you harried us," he told her. "Slaying and terrorizing us, frustrating our plans. I should make you suffer in torment for longer years, kept powerless to work magic or anything else by maimings and amputations. I believe I will—after I see you crawl to me and plead. I shan't know you mean it, of course, unless you leave a blood-trail on that journey, so—"

The second bite of the lash was around her legs just below the knees, pinning them together then hauling back hard. Her feet were jerked from under her, and she fell to the floor, landing on both knees. Her body swayed and almost toppled, shuddering from end to end with pain that she did not voice.

She dared not. The last, hand-sized remnant of black flame was centered on the Simbul's mouth. Should she open it to speak or utter an incantation or even to sob, it would dart within, searing tongue and throat and more, and leave her straining to breathe, let alone defend herself with magic.

"A step too far," Thaltar murmured, taunting her as he—as well-nigh every Red Wizard—had often idly dreamed of doing. "One step ... and doom. You shall not escape me, lady. No legendary power can save you now. No bard's embellishment can deceive me or my spells. You are but a reckless—lone—sorceress, who for too long has struck like a vulture against my kind when we are weary, or hurt, or unprepared. Against a Red Wizard ready for battle, you fall with an ease that invites contempt."

He struck again, the lash laying bare her flank this time, blood spattering the floor in its wake. "Have my contempt," he told her almost gently. "You disappoint me. No sneaking spells to win your freedom while I gloat, no last-second divine defenses? It's all bardic tales, isn't it? All so much empty boasting."

He whipped Aglarond's silent queen until the lash began to shed its spikes, one of them flashing past his forehead a little too close to his own eyes. She was a blood-

drenched, trembling thing by then, hunched over on knees and elbows. He stepped forward to kick her hidden face—then, at the last moment, drew back, sudden fear flooding his mouth with a taste like blood-iron. No! He must not give her an opportunity to touch him directly. She might be waiting for just such a chance to confer some horrible magical doom on her tormentor. Yes, her tormentor! Who'd have thought Thaltar Glaervar would be the one to bring the Simbul of Aglarond, Chosen of Mystra and most deadly of the Seven Sisters, to her knees?

Thaltar stepped back a safe distance, held the dripping lash in his hands, and wove a spell with careful precision before letting go. The blood drenched whip rose under the bidding of his will, drifting through the air like a snake that could fly, and slid around the shaking woman gently, almost caressingly, looping about one of her wrists before swooping back to her waist.

He'd feared she might struggle, or manage somehow to unleash a spell that would come cracking across the all-too-little space between them to harm him, but the Simbul cowered, face hidden behind her hair, as Thaltar guided the spell-animated lash to bind her hands tightly to her sides, loops of it keeping her fingers forcibly splayed and held down tight against her thighs.

When the binding was complete, the Red Wizard let out another long sigh of relief. Pinioned as she now was, even a circus acrobat would find it hard to cast spells of consequence, or even to reach out to deliver magics to a tormenting wizard.

Now it was time to break some bones.

He could lift his captive now by casting his usual combination web of telekinesis and levitation spells on the lash and not the woman herself, and still move her about just as if he'd dared to work magic directly on her body. With unhurried care Thaltar Glaervar cast the spells he'd need,



drew in a deep breath, checked again behind him, then lifted the limp Queen of Aglarond into the air.

She hung there with her ruined hair hanging down over her face, blood drooling down to the floor from beneath it. Thaltar looked at her and found himself laughing, deep chuckles of glee that rose up and burst forth wildly. He had done it! He had humbled the one person to ever dare stand alone against the Red Wizards of Thay!

"Yes!" he cried in ringing triumph, and slammed her into the nearest wall. There were solid thumps as her shoulders struck and her legs and head flailed, but the only sharper, cracking sounds he heard were of plaster shattering, as the sculpted flowers that wall was decorated with paid the price of their unexpected admirer's arrival.

Thaltar tugged at the lash with his mind, bringing the Simbul back to a jerking halt in midair. Her legs dangled loosely. He drew back his lips in a less than pretty grin, and slammed her back against the wall once more. Plaster clattered in earnest this time, flowers raining down in rubble to the floor as the bound queen rebounded from the wall, twitching and trembling.

The Red Wizard peered at the spreading cracks his work had made, then at the floating, dripping bundle, and brought them together again. Cracks widened, slabs of painted wall slid toward the floor, and his human hammer looked a little more shapeless. He'd best stop while she still lived, or her passing would be too easy. Thaltar Glaervar would lose himself magical power he might be able to harness, a victim whose torment he could really enjoy whenever he needed to, and something worth a lot should he ever desire—or need—to bargain.

Just once more! The Red Wizard turned the Simbul in the air until she was horizontal, feet toward the wall. Her brain mattered, but a sorceress who couldn't walk would be all the easier to keep biddable. The legs dangled, not held by the lash, but if he just guided a loose end of it. ... One

was hanging down. It must have already started to come undone in the fury of striking the wall. He could bring her legs up and around in a spiral, thus, and they could serve to make her a ram. Yes, he'd hear bones splinter, and perhaps a scream from those stubborn lips, at last.

Thaltar drew in his will, then hurled his human missile at the exposed timbers and rubble where she'd struck before. Perhaps she'd even pierce the wall, and he could leave her hanging head down as a trophy whilst he collected scrolls and wands to have magic enough to defend himself again.

The Simbul smashed into the wall with a crash that shook the room, and the Red Wizard heard the grisly splintering sounds he'd been waiting for. He also heard the clatter of the rubble that filled the wall inside the plaster falling away, tumbling into the room beyond, and carrying a certain limp, wet bundle with it. With a groan, a lot of wall fell away, and Thaltar blinked through rising dust at a gaping hole where an ornate wall of sculpted flowers had been not so long before.

Light was coming through that opening, and he heard a man's voice call a question.

Another male voice, curious and much closer, replied, "The gods know! A woman, I think, or *was*. There's something about—Wait, she's moving!"

"What's that around her?"

"Rope of some sort—no, it's a slave whip. She was bound with it. Look out, she's trying to get her hands on something!"

"Shall I—?"

"Not yet. If this is a spell duel, and we interrupt, we'll be stepping into a feud between masters of power—zulkirs, perhaps. No, let's just"—Thaltar heard the sounds of feet scrambling amid loose stone—"get away from here."

By then, he'd climbed rubble himself, to the lip of the hole in the wall and a vantage point from whence he could

look into the next room. Another meeting chamber, furnished with another vast, dark polished table, many high-backed chairs, and two apprentice mages whose faces told their excited bewilderment to the world. They were staring up at Thaltar, but he ignored them. They'd recognized him and wouldn't dare send any spells his way, no matter how much they'd have preferred not to be recognized. They were nothing. He had something more important to look at.

She was lying on her back in a fall of rubble, with the half-buried lash fallen away from her, and Thaltar could see the fire of furious, pain-wracked eyes through the tangle of dust-caked silver hair that cloaked her face. Her eyes fixed on him.

The Simbul was awake, aware, and struggling feebly with smashed, bloody, trembling hands to draw forth a wand from a crosswise sheath hidden beneath her breasts. She'd already got it out, and was turning it.

In a sudden panic, Thaltar Glaervar cast the mightiest spell he knew, hurling a meteor swarm into the face of the sorceress and hurling himself headlong backward, away from the hole in the wall.

Better the Simbul than himself as a trophy corpse—and one could always find more apprentices. The room he'd peered into exploded with a roar that hurled the ruined wall right at him, shook the building, and brought down ceiling plaster here and there.

Thaltar struck the floor, skidded along on his shoulders, and somersaulted over backward, calling on one of his rings.

He was just in time. The wall of force flickered into being just as the first hurtling stones reached it. Despite knowing the magic had turned aside arrows, hurled pikes, and even a charging horse on previous occasions, Thaltar backed away, flinching, as a deafening barrage of stone struck it. When the silence fell and the room stopped rocking, he launched himself grimly into a run, sprinting

around one end of his spell-spun barrier, heading for the foe he'd just crisped.

He had to be sure. He had to *know* she was dead, or at least still his captive, not escaped to creep into his nightmares from now on, as he awaited the day the Simbul would smilingly spring the trap that would visit her revenge on the Red Wizard who'd hurt her so.

Thaltar clambered over loose, shifting stone in clawing haste, climbed into the eddying smoke and dust, and peered into the open area beyond. He could see nothing yet, and waited tensely, listening to stone creak as it cooled.

His hands were raised and another battle spell was ready in his mind, but if he should need that, it was more than likely he'd be turning to flee as swiftly as he'd ever run in his life, from one cache of magic to another, snatching up what he'd need to keep himself alive against a wounded and raging Witch-Queen of Aglarond.

Time stretched; stillness gathered. It was dark in the chamber beyond. Reluctantly—for doing so would betray his presence and whereabouts—he cast a dancing lights spell high and far, to shine down on the settling soot and dust. The room seemed ash-cloaked and lifeless.

Heart sinking, Thaltar Glaervar waited with increasing foreboding to see what his spellblast had wrought. Wisps of smoke were drifting lazily up from charred fingertips at the back of the chamber, but that cooked corpse was almost certainly one of the apprentices.

A part of the distant rear wall sighed into collapse then, and the sudden movement brought fear's icy clutch to Thaltar's heart. The Red Wizard tensed anew when there came groans from under and behind that wall, but they were male voices . . . and they were too far away to be what concerned him. He was seeking something much nearer, in the scorched stones just below where he crouched.

It was a long time before the air was clear enough to see what he'd been peering at so intently. The headless,

ashen form of the other apprentice, leaning against the rock where it had been driven by the blast, became visible first.

He peered, ducking his head to see better. Sitting on its back facing him, just about *there*, should be—if the gods smiled—what was left of the Simbul...

Smoke drifted away with almost taunting lassitude, then was gone.

The impatient Red Wizard found himself staring at a figure of ashes. Smoke still curled up from the featureless, hairless figure; he knew that at a touch the charred remnants of flesh would fall away from the bones beneath, and the bones in turn collapse.

But one smoldering arm still held a wand aloft. It was unmarked by fire, and therefore almost certainly still magically potent, and it was pointed at him.

Thaltar left a frightened little gulp in his wake as he ducked down his side of the rocks, sliding helplessly for a few seconds. He lay there panting for a moment or two, staring up at the scorched ceiling, and in his mind saw again the utter ashen ruin of the body.

No, the Simbul was dead. No will or wit remained to trigger that wand. He told himself that several times on his careful clamber back up the scorched rocks, to look down again. Everything was as it had been. The smoking, ashen form with the wand in its hand had not moved.

Thaltar let out a long sigh of relief, then cast a careful spell. When he used its magic to whisk the wand away, the hand that had gripped it crumbled into drifting ash. He brought the wand to a gentle landing not far from his foot, in a cleft where it couldn't possibly roll to touch him, and cast another spell.

A storm cloud of flickering purple darkness came into being above the ashes, and at his soft command, burst into a brief rainfall—a torrent that crashed down on the ashes that had once been the Simbul. The hissing and bubbling was almost deafening. Thaltar watched the sitting figure

slump to ashen bones then to nothingness, and kept on watching until the acid of his spell had eaten its way deep into the stones that had underlain the destroyed sorceress, and the hissing was done.

Only then did he look down at the wand. He watched the motionless stick of wood for a long time before he bent, snatched it up in triumph, and cried forth a shout that echoed back from the battered walls and ceilings around, "And so at last the Witch-Queen is laid low!"

The other ring on his finger winked, and he was gone from that place, ignoring the groans of dying Red Wizards.

The sphere of crystal floating over the table winked and sparkled into life. Sixteen people sat straighter in their chairs and tried to look impassive. Eleven of them shook out the sleeves of their purple, red-sashed robes, and two of them ran nervous hands over their black skullcaps and squared their shoulders so that the purple Eye of Shar on their breasts hung unwrinkled. Rings winked and glittered up and down the table like votive temple candles flickering in a breeze.

The sphere flashed again, as if in a signal, and one of the two women at the table leaned forward and said calmly, "Let us begin. We face a problem that, if unattended, will perhaps soon be a crisis. Two of those absent this night will never sit at this or any other table again. Roeblen and Azmyrandyr are dead."

There was a stir around the table, murmurs of excitement that stilled as the woman spoke again.

"They were destroyed, we believe, by the spells of the Witch-Queen of Aglarond, and we must assume that these murders were more than her long-running campaign to rid Faerun of all Red Wizards. They may be just that, but we here must for our mutual safety take the view that they are blows struck deliberately at us—just as when Dove Falconhand of the Seven Sisters appeared far from her usual haunts to slaughter many of our dark elf allies in Scornubel,

where Qilue Veladorn also struck out at us, shortly thereafter. Qilue was soon afterward seen in Skullport with her sister Laeral, spying on some of our operations. This was barely a day before one of our number was hampered in his activities in Silverymoon by another of the Seven, the High Lady Alustriel. Significantly, the operative in that case called upon the services of three Red Wizards to aid him in battle against the Chosen. Roeblen and Azmyrandyr were two of those mages."

Eyes up and down the table strayed to where Thaltar Glaervar sat, looking as impassive as he knew how. Many knew who the third mage was, and would now be wondering...

"The link that fires our suspicions," the woman continued, "is that the operative who so narrowly escaped Alustriel in Silverymoon was almost slain by spells that destroyed the home in which he was living in disguise, shortly after several witnesses saw a silver-haired woman—and I need hardly say that silver hair is a distinctive mark of the Chosen—on the premises. This befell not long before the deaths of Roeblen and Azmyrandyr."

The speaker paused, then, but no one murmured anything into the tense silence that cloaked her glancing up and down the table, and finally up at the globe hanging above them. Her dark eyes flashed with excitement as she leaned forward still more, placing her elbows on the table, and added, "Wherefore we are gathered to warn all, and discuss what should best be done to counter future attacks upon us by the Chosen. We know not the extent of their knowledge of us, but again, for safety's sake, must assume that they know all." Her gaze flicked up and down the table again ere she added the formal phrase, "Let one speak now who brings wisdom to the matter at hand."

One of the Red Wizards seated near to her stirred and said, "If the Seven know less than all about us, one here at this table stands in the greatest danger. Protecting him with

our risen power, in a covert trap, would seem to be our logical course."

The wizard did not bother to look at Thaltar, but heads turned to regard him up and down the table.

The woman met Thaltar's eyes, and said gravely, "Lord Skloon uses the word 'logical,' and I find myself in no disagreement with that. How do you feel about living, for an indeterminate time to come, in the midst of battle-ready colleagues who must needs watch your every move if they are to protect you?"

Thaltar shrugged. "If it is needful, Speaker Amalrae," he said calmly, "I have no particular objection. I fill chamber pots in the usual manner, I live a relatively quiet life of study, and as all here know, Red Wizards have no secrets."

This deadpan sally was received around the table with an amusement that could be felt more than heard. Thaltar leaned forward as Amalrae had done, and added quietly, "I do think it may be needful—and that the Red Wizards of Thay have been handed an opportunity this day that the gods themselves could not have bettered. An opportunity all of us here at this table share."

"How so?"

"I speak of an opportunity to unleash magic as we never have before, against foes we know are coming. A chance to rid Faerun forever of annoyingly meddlesome women with silver hair."

Another wizard frowned, and said in a deep voice, "How can you be so sure that we can know these foes will come to a specific place or time?"

Thaltar Glaervar turned cool eyes to meet those of the deep-voiced wizard and replied, "Lord Harkon, they will come to me—wherever I am, and soon, in fury unmatched. We must be ready for them, or this opportunity is squandered."

Harkon raised his eyebrows and said, "You presume overmuch as to your own importance, methinks. Why 'they'?"



Why not just the Simbul, the only one of the Seven to consistently hunt Red Wizards—the only one of the Seven to thus far act against the Red Wizards among us?"

Thaltar allowed a smile to cross his face for the first time at that meeting as he rose and replied, "I have good reason to believe that we shall shortly be entertaining more of the Seven than we might wish to, and that the Simbul will not be among them. Perhaps I do flatter myself, Lord Harkon, but I think I am now sufficiently important to be noticed by Chosen of Mystra all over Toril. I've just come from one of my abodes, where I found it necessary to replenish my spells. That necessity arose in an incident wherein I procured this."

From the flaring sleeve of his robe Thaltar shook out a wand, and set it gently on the table.

"Before you ask why I'm showing you a wand that to the eye resembles many another," he continued, "I must tell all here that bare hours ago this wand was aimed at me by the Witch-Queen of Aglarond herself."

His gaze swept the table. Every eye was fixed on him, and the room was utterly silent. For the first time ever, he had the full attention—and respect—of the gathered cabal.

Thaltar drew in a deep breath and told them, "Alone I contended against her, and alone I prevailed. I have slain the Simbul. Colleagues of Thay, *Aglarond is ours!*"

His words brought instant uproar. Thaltar permitted himself a real smile amid the din, as he saw just what he'd expected to see on the faces of his fellow Red Wizards: wary disbelief, wonderment, and the dawning of sudden hope, even glee. The scrying globe overhead flashed as it rolled over to allow the being staring out of its depths to better examine the wand.

Thaltar had suspected that producing the wand would result in a rolling away of the mask of mists that had always cloaked the features of the man in the globe. He wasn't disappointed. Peering up through his own eyebrows as he tried to keep his head tilted down, he saw the globe

shimmer and clear, then beheld an elderly man seated at a table. Eyes that snapped with alert intelligence peered out of the globe. Thaltar saw long white hair and a bald-crowned head, gaunt features, and hands clasped on the table in the foreground. On one finger of those hands was a long, iridescent green ring that looked like the carapace of a beetle.

It was rare for the man in the sphere to speak, but he did so now, in a voice that was cold with misgiving, and sharp with alarm. "What magic do you awaken in the wand now, Red Wizard?"

Thaltar's gaze fell to the wand. As if mocking him, it winked once, then flashed forth a beam of soft green radiance—a beam that passed between two shouting, scrambling wizards of Thay to strike the wall of the meeting chamber, and there splash and spread out in all directions, curving along the walls and floor to cloak them in its glow with astonishing speed.

Thaltar stood frozen, a strange foreboding growing within him, but the other fifteen people in the room worked frantic magics, or made for the doors—only to find them already blocked by a glowing green field that seemed to be made of nothing at all... and yet resisted their every weapon, bodily charge, and spell.

Thaltar almost reached out to snatch up the wand, then drew his hand back. As he backed away from where it lay, the sphere above it flashed again then went dark, leaving behind only a single parting comment: "Fool!"

The glowing field had become an unbroken sphere within the chamber, a humming presence that crowded the folk of the cabal around the table and lifted their boots from the floor with its crackling force, enclosing them.

The beam ended, and Thaltar took an uncertain step back toward the wand—only to recoil as it boiled up into an all-too-familiar shape that stood barefoot atop the table in a garment that was more black tatters than a gown, and

smiled coldly at him then around at the assembled folk of the cabal.

"Thay's perennial problem," the Simbul sighed in mock sorrow, turning with her open hand outstretched to indicate the assembled conspirators. "Such an overabundance of Red Wizards, and such a shortage of people fit to be called human."

She shook her head and let her hands fall to her hips—only to vanish, an instant later, in the white, roiling heart of an inferno of spells.

Wizards all around the chamber hurled their most potent-slaying magics. In the instant before a ricocheting beam of slicing force took him in the chest and hurled him back into oblivion with one last scream, Thaltar saw something boiling up, like a whirling tornado, from where the queen of Aglarond had been standing. It seemed to flow up into the glowing field and merge with it, rippling outward as unleashed death raged beneath it. Fire and lighting snarled around the table, which caught fire and burst into flaming splinters in two short instants, and men screamed as they melted into skeletons and were swept away.

Then the slower spells—the fireballs and bursting spheres and gigantic, disembodied hands—took effect, their blasts raging around a glowing sphere that the few surviving eyes in the chamber saw flicker, darken, and grow holes here and there—holes that grew swiftly larger, as the sphere seemed to melt. One Red Wizard was on his feet and thrusting at the glowing field with his dagger. It seemed to darken and give way where he stabbed most energetically.

Hope rose in Speaker Amalrae and in Lord Skloon as they wove magics with hands that trembled with pain, seeking only to shatter this prison woven by the Simbul, and escape.

The holes closed again as the sphere tightened, glowing brightly once more as it swept the three people in whom life still flickered together into a huddled, snarling group.

"A prismatic wall!" Lord Harkon shouted, his voice high with fear as he flung down his dagger and gestured. "Cast thus, to cut through this—this—"

Words failed him, and he hurled himself into frantic casting.

Skloon glanced up at his fellow lord in grim, head-shaking despair, knowing only too well what was coming. The spells he and Amalrae had woven were going to manifest, rebound from this astonishing field, and strike back at them. It wasn't anti-magic, now, so what *was* it? A pocket of the stuff the Weave was made of? But that was all so much bardic nonsense, fables told to apprentices as a reason for the limits to the Art that no one understood. Looking into Amalrae's eyes, he could see that she knew their doom too.

"Mystra," he quavered, calling aloud in prayer to the Lady of Mysteries for the first time in long, long decades, "be with us ... please?"

"And have mercy," Speaker Amalrae moaned, putting her arms around Skloon in a last embrace that overcame hatred and rivalry. It is never easy to die alone.

There came the flash and roar they'd been dreading, and the three conspirators were hurled together to tumble helplessly around the dwindling sphere as magic clawed and seared, tearing Amalrae apart and burning Skloon into a husk.

Drenched in the Speaker's blood, Lord Harkon rose grimly with his bare hands glowing a bright amber hue. "So much for the mercy of Mystra," he snarled. "She helps those who help themselves!"

He moved his hands as if he were gripping a great sword. His prismatic wall flashed into existence, then, rippling in the air before him in the shape of a sword. Even if his two rivals had lived, the time for secrets was past. This was his greatest innovation, and it just might cut a way to freedom.

Lord Harkon roared his defiance and hacked at the glowing field. It darkened and withdrew a little from his conjured sword, and he slashed again with the prismatic blade.

The glowing field rippled like a sail around him, and seemed to collapse. With a wild, wordless cry of exultation, Harkon flailed at it with his blade.

It was gone from above him, dwindling into a snake-like mass that rippled in the air, danced around his blade, and surged down the wizard's throat like a ribbon snake.

Harkon barely had time to choke before the glowing thing expanded, bursting him apart like a ripe tomato. Amid his spattering blood the feebly-glowing, snakelike thing wavered upright in that chamber of death and became the Simbul once more. She was bleeding from many small wounds, and reeled as she stumbled to a wall, leaning against it for support.

"Elminster," she murmured, throwing back her head to gasp out the words she needed to say. "Come. Please."

## **Storm**

### **Not Just any Mage in a Storm.**

*I see a woman leaping like a flume in battle, bathed in the blood of foes, her sword singing a deadly song. I see her crisply negotiating peace while she bathes, unashamed, I see her tending the wounded of both sides, comforting the grief-stricken, and imparting counsel to bewildered young inheritors who must now shape their lives alone—words that they'll remember and cling to for years to come. I see her going to her knees to play with a neglected child in the dust, whilst captains-of-war stand waiting, and keep silent. And in all their eyes I see the same look of awe and love.*

*I never thought humans could so love a storm.*

Belbradyn Tralaer

from *Why I Am A Harper*

published circa the Year of the Staff

It was that evening-time when the shops of Shadowdale had closed, and the lowering sun told every eye that the long, slow slide into dusk had begun. Farmers were still hard at work because there was still ample light to work by, but most other dalefolk were sitting down to a hearty evenfeast, weary from another good day's work. The lanes of Shadowdale were well-nigh deserted. Fitting for the loneliest walk of all.

Maervidal Iloster walked past the Old Skull Inn quite alone, sighing as he turned onto the Northriver Road in front of the temple of Chauntea. He was dressed well, in a black leather vest and breeches, with a mauve silk shirt a Sembian dandy would not have been sorry to be seen in, and knee-high boots as dashing as anything a Cormyrean noble could boast. Yet his face was grim and his pace slow, almost dawdling. He knew he was walking to the place where he was going to die.

They'd found him out. Just how, he knew not, but it no longer mattered. They knew.

All day the Zhentarim who normally contacted him—Oleir and Rostin—had taken turns oh-so-casually dropping into his shop, giving him cold smiles and gentle reminders of the revel to which he'd been invited three days ago.

Just before closing, their superior—Samshin, whom he usually saw but once or twice a year—had strolled in to loom over the counter and huskily bid him well met, and to express the fond hope that they'd be able to share drinks together at Warmfires when the sun was fallen from the sky. Oh, they knew.

Since the day—three sunrises back, now—Oleir had leaned on the same counter to deliver the invitation, he'd felt cold, unseen eyes watching him. Waiting to see where he'd run to, and who he'd contact. Everyone who stepped into Crown & Raven Scriveners to order a sign or browse the stock was under suspicion.

What would become of his shop, after he was gone? They'd plunder it, to be sure. For all that it stood within easy view of the Twisted Tower itself, an easy trot for the guards on the Ashaba bridge, it had a back door none could see from the road. After a spell-fed fire blazed up and devoured it, who would check in the ruins for the writing paper, framed and mounted poems and illustrations, signs, heraldry, pens, inks, and portraits that should have been there? And what of Rindee?

A pretty lass she was—too pretty to escape grasping hands, if the Zhents felt so inclined. Maervidal had taken her on as his assistant for her skilled hands with the brush, not for her face and figure, but he doubted any Zhentarim would care for a finely-curved letter or a superbly-rendered coat of arms. She was a local, and didn't have to be shrewd to know something was amiss, but he'd told her nothing. He should have warned her, but she lived on a farm too far in the wrong direction—west of his shop, well over the river in the

newly-cleared lands—to turn back now. But if the Zhents caught her. . . .

He felt sick, but what could he do? They were watching his house even now, on this clear, warm evening. All it would take was one man with a crossbow, back in the woods, who might shoot even if he turned back just to leave a note. They were all around him, hidden but watchful.

He should have been ready for this, with letters written out and left in safe hands. After all, only a fool could expect to watch and whisper for the Zhents and beneath it all do the same for the Harpers, and not get caught at it eventually. Somehow, though, he'd thought "eventually" would take longer to arrive.

"We'll be expecting you," Oleir had said with a crooked grin, his eyes as cold as winter, "at Warmfires House, by dusk. Don't be late."

Oleir was tall and broad-shouldered, yet moved with uncanny silence. A forester who could crush half a dozen Maervidal Ilostors in his bare hands, he was probably out there in the trees now, watching the doomed scrivener trudge up the road. The Zhents could muster twenty like him.

"Stand and face it, Maervidal," he whispered aloud. "You're doomed."

Warmfires House was a Sembian venture that stood on the new northern edge of central Shadowdale, in a bend of the Ashaba. It was a huge, rambling farmhouse that could be rented by the day, two days, or a tenday at a time. Maervidal had been in it only once, on a gawking tour with other dalefolk when it was not quite finished. He'd been brought in to see the dance floor in the feast hall, the meeting rooms above it, the bathing pool rooms, and the luxurious bedchambers. It hadn't been quite the success the greedy Sembians had hoped, but the Lord Mourngrym had built a guard post nearby, and considered it the anchor of the new



cluster of homes and shops folk had taken to calling "Northend."

It was a good long walk from Twisted Bridge to Northend, but to Maervidal it was seeming all too short, now. His last walk in the clear air—gods blast it all, his last walk anywhere!

How had they found out? Oleir, a tall, blond forester, as strong and as stupid as the trees he cut down and the bears he trapped, was vicious enough, but too slow-witted to put two ends of a broken blade together and see that they matched. Rostin was sly and quiet enough to overhear things, but he was a scribe-for-hire staying at the Old Skull only for a tenday to write letters, contracts, and records for hire, before walking on to Tilverton then back and down to Ashabenford. Samshin was in the dale even less. Just now, he was posing as a farm laborer looking for work. He'd talked idly, as he turned to go, of how when a fugitive gets hunted across a quiet dale, all sorts of innocent people get knifed by mistake. In other words, if Maervidal tried to run, they'll murder a lot of dalefolk, and blame it on him, branding him an outlaw forever.

The scrivener sighed again. It really didn't matter how they'd found out, did it?

He glanced at the dark, wooded bulk of Fox Ridge ahead on his right, and shrugged. Perhaps it was full of Oleir and a dozen Zhent comrades, perhaps not. It didn't matter now. None of it mattered now.

A figure turned into the road ahead, and his heart leaped in sudden hope. A woman had stepped out of the mouth of her own farm lane. The woman drew every male eye in an instant, even when dressed in an old leather jerkin and breeches, stained from farm work and accompanied by floppy old knee boots that had gone the color of the dust and old mud that had so often caked them.

Maervidal swallowed. It wasn't just her height—she was taller than most knights and smiths he'd seen, the sort of

height and shoulders that seemed to fill a doorway—but the silver hair that cascaded down almost to her ankles. It was tied back like a horsetail, with a scarf that looked like an old scrap of black silk—a scarf that every man who'd hoisted a tankard at the Old Skull knew was a dancer's costume that covered so little that Storm rarely bothered to put it on. Maervidal closed his eyes for a moment, his mouth suddenly dry, at the memory of the last time she'd shed her farm leathers to spring up onto a table in that costume—and of the dance and song she'd given them all then.

It wasn't just her dancing, though, it was her walk. All fluid, sensual grace—not the proud strut of a cat that knows it's beautiful, and flaunts it, but the calm, confident lilt of a creature who knows she is stunning to the eyes, but cares not—and it was her eyes. They were dancing and merry, a flashing blue as they looked down the dale, and found the view pleasant. These eyes promised everyone good humor, real interest, and a teasing, daring excitement. They were the eyes of the most famous woman in all the dales.

Common folk knew her skill with the harp, but true Harpers knew just how much they, and all Faerun around them, owed the Bard of Shadowdale.

"Tymora and Mystra, smile upon me together now," Maervidal whispered hoarsely to the air. He'd never uttered a prayer so fervently in all his life.

Storm Silverhand had been absent from the dale a lot this winter—down Senibia way playing ballads for rich nobles and stacking up the gold coins they tossed her, some said—and he'd hardly traded six words with her yet this spring. It had been too much to hope for her to be around now, but she knew who he was. "Oh, great gods above, save me now!" he whispered, finding himself very close to tears, and made himself stroll toward her without calling out or breaking into a run.

She was coming abreast of him, nodding to him in pleasant, wordless greeting, and striding by. Now!

Maervidal Iloster turned to the Bard of Shadowdale as if something had just occurred to him, and laughed loudly. It sounded a little wild even in his own ears, and she spun around to face him, hand falling with smooth grace to the hilt of the sword she always wore.

Desperately he hissed out his situation to her, trying not to lose control of his voice. He found himself on the verge of tears only a few words later, pleading with her to come to the revel and rescue him.

She drew herself up and looked stern, and for one awful moment Maervidal thought she was going to rebuke him for being a craven coward, and send him on his way with harsh words, send him on his way to death. Instead, the Bard of Shadowdale stepped forward and embraced him. Maervidal found himself trembling, struggling not to break down and cry, as Storm Silverhand—who stood almost a head taller than he, and smelled distractingly of forest floors and nose-prickling spices—embraced him and said into his ear, "Press yourself against me, Maervidal. Right in close—don't be shy. Thrust your belly and hips against me. Clasp your arms together, around my neck, and sag against me ... aye, like that. Now speak not, and keep still."

The wondering scrivener felt a sudden strangeness sweep over him, a tingling that left him feeling empty and faintly sick. Something stirred, then surged through him . . . from Storm's hips, he thought. Or perhaps it seemed that way because he could feel her hands busy thereabouts, her knuckles grazing him as she did something that... that...

She was putting a belt around his waist—a waist that was more shapely than he remembered. *His* hips didn't stick out like that. And he was taller now, looking down at the muddy dale lane from a greater distance than he remembered, looking down even at Stor—ye gods!

Maervidal swallowed. He was looking down at himself. That is, where Storm had stood was a man with untidy brown hair and large, liquid brown eyes. It was the same handsome

rake who looked back at him from his shaving mirror each morning. And he himself was ... he looked straight down, at the body beneath his own chin.

"Great *thundering* gods!" he whispered hoarsely, utterly aghast. The man who looked like him chuckled.

"My body's not all that bad," she said, "for something that's seen around six hundred summers. Wear it well."

She clapped him on the arm and turned north, back the way she'd come—or rather, the way he'd been heading.

"But—" Maervidal managed to blurt, noting that his voice sounded lower, and more musical. "But—"

Storm turned around again, winking at him with his own eyes, and said quickly, "We haven't really switched bodies—just exchanged shapes. You'll be yourself again in the morning."

She giggled—Maervidal hadn't known his body *could* giggle—and he knew he, or rather, Storm Silverhand, the shape he was wearing, was starting to blush. He'd stared down at his new-found breasts in wonder, and without thinking had shaken himself to make them sway and bob. She'd buckled her sword belt around his hips—that'd been what he felt her doing. As for the rest, he was wearing her farming leathers, shiny with hard use at the knees and elbows, and she was him, in his best mauve silk shirt and black finery.

"You'll find coins in plenty slid in all along the sword belt," she said gently. "Now don't forget—you use the ladies' jakes this night, not that smelly corner one you men spray about in, so. Don't worry if it all seems strange. Just smile a lot, say little, and wait for the morning. My house is open. Feel free to eat and sleep as it pleases you. Oh, aye—when you're in the Skull, you'd best be careful who you have a drink with."

"Uh, pardon?" he asked, putting his hands on his—her, oh, to the Nine Hells with this: *his*—hips as he'd seen Storm do.

She winked at him. "I was on my way to the Old Skull Inn, to try to convince Jhaele to take the vacation she's been longing for, and see Waterdeep like she's dreamed aloud of doing, for years. Don't try to do that, but if you feel uncomfortable, just put your elbows on the bar and ask, 'Jhaele, what news of Waterdeep?' Then just let her talk."

Maervidal nodded, then stopped, smiled, and nodded as he'd seen her do it, head tilted a little to the right, and a hand lifted as if to cup the chin.

She nodded approvingly. "Ver-ry good. What I meant about the drinks was that three of the regulars at the Skull are becoming quite ardent. Hands on my knees and wandering higher ... that sort of thing."

The scrivener who now looked like Storm Silverhand swallowed. "And I should do what—?" he asked faintly. Suddenly, and just for a wild, fleeting moment, walking to sure death didn't seem so dark a thing. He closed his eyes and thought he'd probably kiss every man in the taproom of the Skull if that's what it would take to keep him alive.

"Josh them pleasantly. Don't act shocked. The rest, I'll leave to you. The ones to watch out for are Sarnjack, Old Juk, and Halcedon."

Maervidal's eyes narrowed. "Sarnjack I know, but the others .. ."

"Mystra above, man," Storm said to him, in his own incredulous voice, "*you* live in this dale for four seasons as an informant for the Zhents and for us, and don't know every last man and woman in the dale? No wonder you were walking to your—"

She saw the stricken look that climbed across his face, and quickly said, "Sarnjack the ring maker—weathered face, retired farmer from Mistledale? Recall him?" At his nod, she went on. "Big, fat, balding man who sits over the chessboard most nights, retired from farming in Voonlar to raise chickens here. That's 'Old Juk,' but you'll want to tartly call

him by his full name, Belinjuk Trawan, as his wife does—to remind him he's still married."

Maervidal didn't smile. He was nodding slowly, vaguely remembering the fat man by the chessboard.

Storm said swiftly, "In case we're being watched, I should go. The last man is the one you really should have been keeping an eye on. Halcedon Muiryn was once a hiresword, but someone took his right arm off at the elbow for him, and now he tutors lads in weaponsplay, spies on caravan shipments for all manner of merchants, and makes those fine long swords you see him selling to travelers in the Skull. He has a pair of jaws, like a smith's pincers, fitted to his stump. Got that? Good, now wish me luck."

"Storm," Maervidal Iloster said, swallowing back threatening tears, "May you have all the luck the gods are willing to hand out to mortals for the next season or so. They know better than I how much you deserve it."

He drew in a deep breath, and asked the last thing that was troubling him then. "But what of when I'm myself, on the morrow? Won't the Zhents just come after me then?"

Storm gave him a wintry smile. Maervidal stared at her; he'd never realized before just how chilling one of what he called his "smiles of cold promise" really looked.

"If my plans work out," she told him softly, "there won't be one of them alive to come after you in the morning."

He stared at her for a moment, then a sudden shiver swept the length of his body. "Hmm," Storm said, surveying the result critically. "That looks ... interesting."

She turned and left him then, standing dumbfounded in the road, scarcely able to believe his good fortune.

"So, Maervidal, how do you like the wine?" Storni looked up at Calivar Murpeth and smiled with an easiness that the real Maervidal Iloster would not have felt. "It's very good," she said eagerly. "Very... fruity."

"That's the saisha in it," purred Murpeth's right-hand man. Aldluck Dreen had sidled up to them more quietly than

she'd thought such a large man would have been able to move, though the revel was raging heartily all around them. Laughter and loud, well-oiled voices were raised in such a din that the Sembian piper trio could scarcely be heard this far across the lofty hall.

"The what?" Storm asked, playing the role of an innocent scrivener with a good memory and a clear eye, but not much worldliness backing them up. He was the perfect Zhent informant, though they seemed to have found an imperfection in this one. A soon to be fatal imperfection, she had no doubt.

"Saisha," Murpeth said smoothly, darting a quelling glance at Aldluck, who seemed to have already downed rather more firewine than it was good for a man to take aboard this early of an evening, "is more popularly known as hammerlock."

"Because it locks up your joints," Aldluck snarled, "so we have to use a *hammer* if we want to bend them—ahahaha!"

"Aldluck," the sly-tongued local Zhentarim leader said smoothly, "I think it's time to tell Brezter to be ready, don't you?"

His burly henchman peered at him a little owlshly, then reddened, nodded curtly, and spun around to plow his way roughly through the drink-swilling throng.

The false Maervidal watched him go a little longingly, and did not fail to notice that two other men she knew to be Zhents advanced smoothly to fill the gap left by Aldluck's departure. They were keeping their rabbit in a corner, against a wall.

"*Loyal* scrivener," Calivar Murpeth purred proudly, "may I introduce to you Nildon Baraejhe, who's come to us all the way from the Border Kingdoms?"

"To be sure the saisha was fresh," Nildon said in a wet, avid voice, his eyes gleaming as he looked at Maervidal.

"And over here stands Aliphar Moongul, who deals in perfumes, oils, and medicines."

"As well as more deadly things," the handsome traveling merchant added with a smile, bowing.

They, uh, they certainly weren't s-subtle, were they? Storm adopted Maervidal's best stammer. "I'm, uh, I'm not exactly sure what saisha is, that is, why is, um, why is it so ... important?"

"It costs much," the Borderer hissed, "because the Tashlutan herbs it is made from are rare, and the recipe is secret. It paralyzes the entire body, save for the senses, the lungs, and the jaw—which it makes hang slack—for about three hours, then passes off as if it had never been there."

"And in your three hours," Murpeth purred, "we'll help you to a nice, private bed."

"A bed?" Maervidal asked faintly "Will I, uh, feel sleepy?"

If Storm had been standing there as herself, she'd have asked sardonically, "Where you'll slay me while I can't resist? Well, try not to get blood on the linen." She'd almost said that, but caught herself in time. She had to remember she wasn't being Storm Silverhand just now, but a somewhat handsome, good-natured, scholarly scrivener—a scrivener who'd be so tremblingly scared by now, hemmed in by tauntingly sinister Zhentarim, that he'd be on the verge of filling his pants.

"Ah, uh, excuse me," the false Maervidal said, thrusting her glass into Murpeth's hand. "I—I must visit the jakes!"

She strode between the startled Zhent leader and the Borderer, who didn't slide across to block her rush quite quickly enough. Hearty laughter erupted around the false Maervidal instead, as if she'd said something hilarious. The scrivener almost scurried as she went, clapping a hand to the seat of her breeches as if in distress.

A cold-eyed Calivar Murpeth watched her go, and lifted one hand in a casual gesture. It was a subtle signal, but two



men standing near among the chattering drinkers had been watching for it, and strolled over, lifting their glasses as if in salutation, to murmur, "Yes, lord?"

"The man we were talking to is a Harper. He knows we intend to kill him. Follow him into the jakes, swiftly, and prevent any Harper tricks."

"At once, lord," the two men said, turning in swift unison.

As Murpeth, Baraejhe, and Moongul watched them go, the Zhentarim leader murmured, "our best slyblades, sirs. The more stout one is Wyndal Thone, and the taller, Blaeragh Ridranus. Thone once killed a Watchful Order mage of Waterdeep in the headquarters of the Order."

The eyebrows of the poisoner and the merchant who'd brought him were still rising when they saw Maervidal pause in his hurrying to look back at them all. Murpeth smiled grimly. "Yes. He's up to something."

"One man, in a jakes? He could kill himself, yes," Moongul said, scratching his chin thoughtfully with the lip of his glass, "but what else need you worry about? He doesn't look like much of a challenge. I think any one of my wives could easily down him, if they were both given knives."

"Wives?" the Borderer asked. "Many men find one more than enough."

The merchant smiled thinly. "Merchants who travel much tend to look for places they can relax at either end of a route. Few women know much about a merchant's route, let alone what's at the other end of it."

Murpeth smiled. "As to your question, Moongul, we worry about nothing, but try to keep costs down. If our fleeing scrivener sets fire to this place, or hauls out an enchanted sword, say, the costs of taking him increase. Some of our most powerful mages and priests can afford waste, but they tend to frown on ah, purely local wastage. You could say that fleeing man has already been a waste to us."

When Thone and Ridranus shouldered their way into the jakes, they found it empty of the "purely local waste"—and everyone else. It had one small window, a vent grate, a washbasin, and the glory-stool. The first two were closed and secure, even when Ridranus pitted all of his not-inconsiderable strength against them, and he was a far stronger man than the fleeing scrivener. The third offered no concealment for anything larger than a spider, and the fourth emptied down a chute large enough for a cat, perhaps, but not a man. That left either magic, or—"That alcove, beside the door," Thone hissed, whirling around. "Quickly!"

When the two slyblades jerked the alcove curtains aside and plunged into the gloom within, they found themselves in a cloakroom. It held cloaks on pegs, a rude bench around the walls beneath the hanging cloaks, and a person, turned away from them with one foot up on the bench.

They could see it was not the scrivener. Out of habit the slyblades moved swiftly to block any escape before Thone murmured, "Excuse me ..."

The lady escort who was standing adjusting her garters turned unconcernedly to face them, not bothering to lower her silvershot gown to cover the wisp of silk and the magnificent legs beneath. "Yes, gentlesirs?" she asked with a half smile. "If Talantha can be of service to you in any way...."

Ridranus tried to lean and peer past her—one had to be sure, and the scrivener had been a smallish man, and he might be crouching under the bench in her shadow, mightn't he?—and she lifted an eyebrow at him. "Interested in spending a little coin?"

Long, painted-nailed fingers drew aside the gown to reveal a pert breast capped by a dangle-tassel made of fine strips of goldendazzle. Thone grinned at it despite himself.

When Ridranus started to rumble a refusal to the wench and thrust her aside, Thone caught at his comrade's wrist and said with a gleam in his eye, "Yes. Ten silver, to come

and talk to us for an hour. The drinks are on us. There's some special wine we want you to try." His gaze swept slowly from her head to her toes, collecting her impish smile en route, and when he was done he added with a soft smile, "Depending on what we discuss, we may be able to find more coins later."

The revel was in lull swing—a term that for merchants had nothing to do with dancing and little to do with lady escorts. No, it had to do with swilling wine and gobbling trays of various succulent hand-tarts almost absentmindedly whilst talking ...

. . . and talking, and talking, excitedly remaking the world and almost out of habit trying to forge deals. As the Zhentarim guided their find back through the clusters of loud, flush-faced men, Faerun was being enthusiastically examined and reshaped, here in this crowded feast hall.

"... if one contrives, from time to time, to stop lusting after things, much money and distress, I find, are to be saved."

"... I think your attitude in this matter is weak—"

"... some priests strive for the calm face, yes, but I find the nearest stump or statue can do the blank look even better—and probably think deeper thoughts than the priest, to boot."

". . . trappings of power, man? *What* trappings of power?"

Calivar Murpeth was looking like a thundercloud when the slyblades came back to his corner with a woman—an over-painted lady escort at that, despite the fact that she was very pleasant to look upon, and moved with quiet grace—and not a frightened scrivener. Thone went straight up to him and murmured in his ear, which resulted in a few more hand signs, and certain men hurriedly leaving the press of Sembian game hunters, outlander merchants of all sorts, and even a few dale shopkeepers still crowding the feast hall.

"... so you have a fortune, yes, but do you *deserve* it?"

"... the name escapes me, but I remember those br—"

"Yes, yes, just so. I remember them too."

"... and 'tis a most reprehensible habit."

". . . yet it is obvious—to me at least—that our social spheres are widely different. You boast of something I would never dream of doing—that every Saerloonian, I daresay, would never dream of doing."

". . . you deceive yourself, sir. Why, I—"

". . . that strikes me as particularly scandalous. Why, the —"

"... an immoral compromise! Now, your tyrannies—like Zhentil Keep, before the fall—don't get themselves into messes like that. Oh, no—swords out, a dozen dead, and on we all go. Much cheaper that way."

"Certainly much cheaper if you're one of those twelve, aha?"

When the men he'd signaled had all departed, Murpeth looked at the noisy crowd with distaste and said, "I think we'd all enjoy ourselves more in a private room. If you'll follow me?"

The Zhents all moved with him—and the lady escort, secure on Thone's arm, went with them. If that irritated Murpeth, he did not show it. The slyblade was the most deadly man of them all, and they all knew it.

The Borderer even murmured a joke about it as they climbed some stairs. "I thought you were an expert in *concealed* weapons," he remarked slyly. Thone's only response was a stone-faced wink.

The Zhentarim leader strolled up to doors that two armed guards flung open before him, and into a vast, richly-carpeted room above the feast hall. This one, however, was empty save for tables laden with food, wine, and lit candles, and a row of large merchants' strongchests along one wall. Moongul raised an eyebrow as he noticed them, and peered

at them in a brief—and vain—quest for chalked merchants' marks, but said nothing.

Calivar Murpeth turned and spoke to them all, waving a hand at the tables. "Feel free," he said, and turned his gaze until he ended that invitation looking squarely at the lady escort.

She crossed her wrists upon her breast in the formal salute that the gently reared in the Dragonreach lands give to persons they see as nobility who outrank them, and Murpeth's cool gaze became visibly warmer. He smiled, inclined his head, and murmured, "I trust you are a lady of discretion?"

"In everything, lord," she breathed, looking straight into his eyes. "*In everything!*"

Murpeth gave no sign that her answer had registered with him in any way, but the merchant Moongul cleared his throat and turned swiftly away with a low growl of arousal, deciding that it was high time to seek wine.

Aldluck Dreen rejoined them, looking grim and somewhat more sober. With him were several frightened-looking men. Aldluck stared at Talantha in astonishment, and she gave him a demure smile then turned again to look at the man who was holding her arm.

"Would you like to ... talk?" she murmured, training eyes that were very large on him.

"Soon," Thone told her, guiding her over to a table and pouring her a generous glass from a slender bottle of wine. She did not fail to notice that the glass he poured for himself came from another bottle, of a different shape.

"Very soon," the slyblade told her, as Ridranus followed them like a large, patient shadow. "There's a little business to be attended to first."

Those words had barely left his mouth when one of the men Aldluck had brought paused in mid-word, with his mouth hanging open, and started to drool. He stood stock still, only his frightened eyes moving, roving back and forth

in sudden panic, like an animal thrust into a cage. The woman who wore the shape of Talantha recognized him. This was Gustal Sorold, the night cook at the Old Skull, three years in the dale after departing his native Hillsfar, and a man she already knew was a Zhent agent.

He seemed to tremble all over, as if fighting the paralysis that gripped him, but at that moment the two slyblades left Talantha, as if in response to some signal she hadn't seen, and calmly took Gustal by the shoulders, plucked his feet off the ground, and marched him over to one of the chests. They opened it, took out a pair of dockers' hammers, calmly broke the paralyzed man's knees, and stuffed him into the chest. Then Thone leaned in and did something that made the little yipping and gargling noises the cook had been making stop—or rather, become strangled for a brief, frenzied period, then cease. He straightened up and turned away without a word, and in similar silence Ridranus reached out a long arm and calmly closed and latched the lid of the chest.

Some grim-faced men rushed into the room, then, and for one wild moment Talantha, who stood quietly sipping her wine by the table where Thone had left her, thought they were friends of the cook, here to rescue—or rather, now, avenge—him. The newcomers went straight to Murpeth, however, and muttered reports. Talantha took one idle step away from the tables, and that brought her close enough to hear that these men had scoured the woods around Warmfires and every closet and cellar of the house itself for Maervidal Iloster, and had done so in vain.

The Zhentarim leader acquired his thundercloud look again, but Moongul shrugged and said soothingly, "He'll turn up. You can hold another revel then."

"Wherever he is, he'll be paralyzed by now," the Borderer added quickly, then raised his glass and added, "Good wine. Thanks."

Murpeth nodded his acknowledgment with a distant, distracted air, and strode over to a knot of men who looked like Sembians of middling wealth. It seemed the Zhentarim were now calling on men of all ranks and station, weaving a web of intrigue rather than having spies report directly to the arrogant, ambitious magelings Manshoon had favored. Well, it made them harder to find. Storm drifted over to meet Thone and engage in a little flirtation. She didn't know how much longer this body would have.

It seemed all too soon when the warm tingling rose in her, like a sudden wave. Thone had been looking into her face for a while, now, and the change in his gaze told her he'd seen her react.

This must be the saisha. Storm could move freely—poisons didn't affect Chosen of Mystra in the ways they were supposed to—but she knew she wasn't supposed to be able to. She paused in the act of leaning forward to caress Thone's chin, froze, and let fear leak into her eyes.

Thone scooped her up without pause or ceremony, one hand around her shoulders and the other between her legs and up to grasp her belt at the back. Like a grain sack he swung her around, flung the curt words, "She's ready, lord," across the room to Murpeth, and strode toward a table.

Ridranus was already there. Having pinched the candles out with his fingers, he was now sweeping wine and food unceremoniously aside to clear a space. Thone dumped her down on it and turned away in the same whirling movement. Storm did not have to try to find some believable way to turn a paralyzed head to see where he was going: she knew he was headed for the fireplace.

Ridranus did not wait for Thone's return. "You're going to answer some questions about how our scrivener vanished," he said shortly, "and I have a promise for you, if you fail to tell all. We will hurt you, woman."

With deft, dispassionate fingers he arranged her on her back, arms and legs slightly spread from her body. "First,"

the slyblade murmured, "you will feel the hot fire irons Thone's retrieving right now on your skin, in the most tender places. If you still tell us false, or omit things of importance—and you'd be surprised at how much we do know, and can check against what you say—the irons will find your pretty face next. I imagine you'll have a hard time getting any man to hand you coins for your company after that."

He smiled bleakly, and drew himself up. "Then, 'twill be my pleasure, the breaking of your fingers, one by one. If even that fails," he sighed and regarded his fingernails, "the fire irons will be put into your eyes."

He reached out and gently turned her head to face the room, so she could see two servants putting down tiles, then a hot brazier atop them, as the crowd of Zhentarim gathered in a half circle to watch.

They parted for Thone, as he came from the main hearth with two red-hot pokers in his hands, then parted again to admit a thin, superior man in brown silks, who swept across the room like he owned it, aiming his sharp nose and beady eyes like weapons to sneer down everyone.

An insecure little mageling, Storm judged. His first words confirmed it. In nasal, supercilious tones, he looked down at her and announced, "Iyleth Lloodrun of Ordulin at your service, madam." He let his eyes travel the length of her silver-gowned form and added, "I am here in these scenic dales to hunt, and dislike to be kept from my killing, so I fear I shan't show you overmuch patience for lies or evasions. Answer plainly, and live."

He glanced at Thone, who signaled the readiness of the irons in the portable brazier with a nod, then gave Calivar Murpeth a curt nod, which was returned. The last murmuring gossip stilled, and in the silence that followed the mageling gave the assembled Zhentarim a superior little smile, turned his back on them, and cast a spell that would let him into her mind.



His eyes glittered as he stared down at her, and framed his first question. Storm heard it as a faint, distant whisper, her shields blocking its coercion completely.

*In what regard do you know the scrivener Maervidal Illoster?*

Storm just stared at him, letting her eyes go large and dark with fear. Lloodrun lifted his head and snapped, "She's protected."

There were murmurs of surprise from some of the watching Zhents. A lady escort, shielded? Well, she must be a Harper then, at least. Perhaps even an agent of Cormyr, or ...

Calivar Murpeth gave a shrug that was almost insolent, to show the room that he had no fear of Zhentarim wizards, and murmured, "So break whatever shields her. Use all your spells, if that's what it takes. We'll wait."

The mageling stiffened, locked his eyes with those of the local Zhentarim leader for a long, cold moment, then turned back to the helpless woman on the table. He took care that none of his fellow Zhentarim clearly saw the spell he wove next, and Storm almost smiled.

This could go on for a long time, but she'd be keeping a lot more folk than these evil louts waiting, so why not let down her shields before this puny probe? From what she'd glimpsed of his own mind, laid open in his probe into hers, Faerun would be well rid of this Zhentarim mageling, and the sooner the better.

She let him straighten and smile in triumph at the attentively-watching slyblades, who'd drifted to positions on either side of him along the edge of the table where she lay, before Storm laid bare the full fury of the divine fire that smoldered within her and fried lyleth Lloodrun's brain in a sizzling instant.

Smoke actually puffed out of his ears and mouth as he staggered back. His eyes spit tiny flames as they went dark and sizzled, and he turned to vainly claw the air in front of

astonished, frightened Zhentarim faces, then toppled like a tree, right onto his nose, with a crash that shook the room.

Everyone shouted and snatched out weapons. The room was briefly lit to dazzling brilliance with the reflected fire of so many daggers, drawn in wild unison, then everyone went deathly silent at once.

Lying unmoving on the table, Storm could see the two slyblades glaring at her. Their blades were out, their grips hard and tense, and their eyes never left her for an instant. Calivar Murpeth stepped forward and cleared his throat loudly several times. He was obviously scared, and at a loss to know what to do now, but aware that he must boldly seize the moment and show himself a strong leader or every one of the men in this room would know just how weak he truly was, and begin plotting accordingly.

"Nildon Baraejhe," Calivar said at last, striving to sound coldly calm and managing only to sound brittle, "did you bring your mrildeen with you?"

The Borderer nodded. "Of course," he murmured, and jerked his head at the woman on the table. "An application to her head?"

Murpeth's lips tightened. "Of course," he echoed, his tone not quite mocking.

Baraejhe gave him a brief; wordless look of glacial warning, then strode to Storm, drawing a small, flat bottle from an underarm pouch. He spread a two-fingered dab of the clear, thick ointment on her throat, jaw, nose, and beside either eye before his fingers dipped to the back of her neck and lastly, to touch her upper lip. Where those deft fingers went, there came a tingling, as the mrildeen banished all paralysis in very small, specific spots under the skin it was applied to.

Before she might try to bite him, the Borderer's other hand struck her hard across her cheek, the hard slap turning her head to stare at the watching men. An instant later, he slapped her other cheek, giving her a view of the nearby

wall and making her ears ring and eyes water. Again he struck her, and again, all of them hard blows that snapped her head back and forth.

"You'll get these full force, and not these gentle taps," he told her almost earnestly, as if explaining how a toy worked to an avid youth, "if you dare to scream. Do try to remember that."

One last blow almost tore one of her ears off, and left her half blinded by tears and half deaf from the roaring raging in her ears.

The Borderer stepped back, giving her a genial smile—she almost found herself trying to smile back at him—and Thone, Ridranus, and Murpeth converged on her in unison. Both of the slyblades plucked pokers from the brazier and held them over her, inches above her face and her breast, letting her feel the searing heat.

"Did you do something to our beloved mage?" Murpeth asked almost idly.

"N-no," Storm said, letting a tremulous sob govern her voice. "No! How could I?"

"Indeed," the Zhent leader purred. "How could you?"

He waved the two pokers away—back into the brazier they went—and let his fingers drop to her belly. Cold fingertips trailed up her smooth curves to stop, almost delicately, at her throat.

"I'm more interested," Calivar Murpeth remarked almost conversationally, "in how you helped Maervidal Illoster escape us earlier, and why. Is he a friend of yours? Or do you work together?"

"I—I don't know him," Talantha the escort said, then screamed as his hand fell like lightning to her breast, and tore off a little tassel, the brass claw that held it to her flesh and all.

It dripped blood as Murpeth held it up and told it gently, "I *do* hate liars—don't you?"

"I'm—I'm telling the truth, lord!" the lady escort sobbed. "Truly! I've never seen him before this night, when I helped him out the back door—the one we escorts use."

"And why did you do that?" Murpeth pounced. "Helping a stranger? Or a client?"

"N-neither, lord. He gave me coin to do it."

The Zhent leader glared at her. "Who?"

Talantha pointed with her eyes at Ridranus, standing beside the brazier with his arms folded and a grim little smile on his face. "That man, by the brazier. He threatened me, too, that if I refused he'd cut off my . . . cut off my ..."

Murpeth whirled away from her and made a hand signal. Five men drew steel and started toward the slyblade in grim, careful unison.

Ridranus went white then red with fury, and snarled, "She lies!" as he brought his own weapon out again.

He was just in time to furiously parry the thrusting blades, but as he deftly turned aside reaching steel and took a quick step back to be out of immediate reach, a strangle wire snapped around his throat from behind. Murpeth and Thone watched like two statues as Ridranus fought like a frenzied man, twisting and kicking in a desperate attempt to topple his attacker over his head. When the slyblade did finally manage to drag the small, agile man forward, the man let go one handle of his wire, and swung on the other as he bounded away, slicing the slyblade's head half off.

As the shocked, staring face of Ridranus lolled crazily to one side and blood fountained in all directions, more than one of the watching Zhents whirled away and began to be noisily sick.

The dark-gloved, leather-clad strangler calmly retrieved his bloodied wire from the slumping corpse and turned back to Murpeth for further orders. The Zhent leader made a grim hand signal that seemed to mingle thanks and an order to "get hence, away."

Calivar Murpeth looked a little like he wanted to be sick himself, but his voice was calm enough, even drawling, as he drifted over to look down at the helpless escort and said, "Suppose you tell me more about the words you exchanged with the man who gave you coin to assist the scrivener out the door. Was there anyone with him?"

"Y-yes, lord. Four men, all with knives. I think one of them had a sword, too."

"I see. Did he name any of these men?"

"N-no."

"Did you see any of them clearly?"

"Yes, lord. All four."

The Zhentarim leader straightened up and gave the other men in the room a chilly smile. "Gentlesirs, I desire you to draw forth and let fall every last blade you carry—*now*—and approach this table."

There was a moment of uneasy hesitation, wherein the Zhentarim leader raised an eyebrow and said mildly, "I'm interested, you see, in exactly how many of you are tardy in following my orders. It will give me a fair idea of how far Maervidal Iloster has infiltrated our ranks with his people, and how many more bodies are going to decorate the floor of this chamber, this night."

He drew back out of their, way smoothly, signing to Thone to watch all of the Zhents as they reluctantly dropped their weapons to the floor and shuffled forward. The glares many of them directed at the still, large-eyed woman on the table were not pretty to behold.

"Look up and down their ranks, lady," Calivar Murpeth said gently. "Say nothing until they step back, then I shall lean close, and you shall whisper to me if any of them stood with Ridranus when he gave you coin. Fear them not. Thone shall protect you."

He nodded his head at the surviving slyblade, who was holding a dagger ready in one hand, its hilt moving rhythmically back and forth as he fondled its tip between his

thumb and first finger. Three drawn daggers waited in his other hand. Thone smiled and nodded his chin in her direction, but his eyes never left the line of reluctant men.

Who now, at Murpeth's gesture, stepped forward.

"Look well," the Zhent leader commanded Talantha, who kept her eyes wide, frightened, and bereft of any recognition as they roved back and forth along the tense, silent line of sullen men.

They stepped back in unison at another signal from Murpeth, who then leaned over and murmured, "Well?"

"The two closest to my feet," the lady escort quavered, "the one on the end, nearest my head, and the one three down from him—the one with white at his temples and the ring in his ear."

Calivar Murpeth gave her a brittle smile and straightened up again to enthusiastically rid his force of four competent men who were guilty of no more than being recognized by Storm from her days of farscrying Manshoon. Veteran killers and practiced thieves, all of them, deserving of death a dozen times over that she knew of, and probably hundreds more that she did not, but no more guilty of assisting Maervidal to escape than Ridranus had been.

"Strabbin Stillcorn, Rungo Baerlan, Raelus Ustarren, and Worvor Drezil," Murpeth said in cold tones. "Step back."

One of the men swore, another spun and started to run, only to stiffen, stagger a few steps, then fall heavily on his side with Thone's dagger in the back of his neck.

"Slay at will," the Zhent leader told his slyblade calmly, drawing his own slender sword.

A dagger whipped out of Thone's hand even as he murmured, "A pleasure, lord." In the candlelight, it flashed end over end like a streak of dancing flame. Across the room, a darting man coughed out a sudden desperate sob, twisted around to claw vainly at the air, and fell, wallowing feebly in his own blood.

Even before his victim struck the floor, the slyblade was gliding forward to intercept the third and fourth men, who'd snatched up weapons from the scattering of discarded ones on the floor and charged Murpeth.

The Zhent leader hastily stepped behind Thone, and the two men instantly lost all enthusiasm for their attack, but almost as swiftly realized they were as doomed if they abandoned it as if they proceeded. First one then the other shrugged at the fate yawning before them, then, with savage yells, they came on again.

The slyblade ducked, moved his arms in a flurry of hurled daggers, re-arming, and guard thrusts, then lunged forward, both of the last pair of daggers in his hands buried to the hilts in the chest and throat of one foe while the other reeled, a dagger quivering in his right eye, and toppled slowly to the floor.

As Thone wrestled aside the body on his blades, another Zhent loomed up over Talantha. It was the man who'd slain Ridranus with his strangling wire.

There was a very large dagger in his hand now, and his face blazed with bright anger. "I'll bet there's a lot more you could tell us, wench," he snarled, "if someone really made you want to talk."

"Toarin!" Murpeth shouted. "Stand away from her. *Now!*"

Unhurriedly the Zhent slayer reached out to slide his dagger up Storm's ribs to prick the underside of one breast. "I can't hear you, Murpeth," he said merrily. "Perhaps it's the sound of my friends Strabbin and Rungo, crying out to me of their innocence. Why you let this bitch condemn us at random, I'll nev—"

"Toarin Klustoon!" Murpeth snarled. "Stand away from that woman *at once!*"

"Toarin," Thone said a moment later, his voice a quiet, warning promise.

The Zhent slayer snarled in wordless disgust and flung down his blade. It bit into the tabletop a whisper away from

Storm's flank, where the blood from her breast was trickling down, humming with Toarin's fury.

The slayer whirled around again, and this time a poker from the brazier was glowing a sullen red in his gloved hands. "Tell the truth, whore," he said loudly, "or I'll—"

He made a thrusting motion at her crotch, and several straying silver threads sizzled as they shriveled away from the heat. Wondering how much longer she should put up with this—after all, what of value were these men going to reveal?—Storm lay still and waited for real pain to begin.

Instead, as so often happens in the life of a Chosen, she was given something else.

*Storm, dearest!*

*"Mother" Sylune, as I live and breathe. Have you been watching?*

*Aye, but not watching you. What befalls?*

*Flat on my back, as usual, here in the dale. I'm entertaining some Zhents who think they're entertaining me. Affectionate fellows they are. We've reached the "hot pokers to the womb" stage.*

*Sylune sent a flare of alarm, then, Need you aid?*

*No, no. These are just the local threaten-and-bluster boys. What aid can I render your way, though? I can tell when you're all upset, Softspoken, and you're upset right now.*

*Well, it is urgent. Lassra—at my urging, mind, not on one of her crack-Red-Wizard-bones-and-drink-their-blood moods—set out to slay a grand harvest of Red Wizards. She shaped herself into an imprisoning sphere, englobing them, and the spells they hurled have left her a—well, a dangerously weakened shell. Elminster is her refuge while she rebuilds herself. In the meantime, if the ever-adventuresome Storm could just take care of this little problem?*

*Certainly, provided you stop being coy long enough to tell me which little problem this might be. Names, faces,*



*and deeds, please, sister. I'm not the Chosen who likes to slaughter every Thayan my eyes fall upon, remember?*

*Lassra smashed most of the sorcerous end of a cabal all six of your sisters have been tracing for a while now, but there's at least one of note left, one often easily tracked by those who can watch the Weave.*

The crotch of the silvershot gown was truly aflame now, flaring up in front of Klustoon's furious face.

*Sister, my nether hair is ashes and my flesh is beginning to cook. Get on with it!*

Through the flame's rising, searing orange tongue, Storm could see the slyblade Thone, face dark with his own anger, almost casually holding back Calivar Murpeth with one hand.

*Halaster! Sylune told her. We need you to track down the Mad Mage.*

The Zhent murderer in front of her growled to get her full attention, and slowly drew back his arm. In a moment, he'd thrust the hot poker forward ...

*Well, at least you got around to telling me which mad mage. Later, sister!*

Storm sat up, letting her flesh start the slide back into her own shape as she caught hold of the poker, twisting and yanking with a sudden surge of strength. The pain made her face go white, but in an instant the fire iron was hers alone, and Toarin Klustoon's chin was plowing helplessly into her knees.

Through the sizzle and stink of her own burning flesh, Storm told the room pleasantly, "I'd love to stay for more of these Heartsteel thrills, but I'm afraid more pressing matters have arisen."

Toarin found balance enough to lift himself off her and grab for a dagger. As Storm's hair began to swirl out to its true length and turn to silver, the gathered Zhents fell back with a general murmur of recognition and fear. She smiled tightly as she bent the poker, the muscles of her arms and

shoulders rippling, and wrapped it around her interrogator's neck. Toarin Klustoon screamed as the flesh of his throat sizzled, then burst into helpless tears as his howls and shrieks of pain rose swiftly to a deafening, wordless babble.

Storm regarded him sourly for a moment, then took hold of the protruding ends of the poker, put her strength to them—and broke the Zhent slayer's neck.

As Klustoon fell to the ground, wet bubbling spraying from his lips, a dagger flashed and winked as it came whirling through the air at Storm. She put up one ruined hand and caught it in deft fingers, twirling it for only a brief moment before she flipped it through the air on a side journey—one that ended in the throat of Calivar Murpeth.

The Zhent leader stared at her over its hilt in disbelief as his rich red blood fountained out. "You weren't—You mustn't—" Murpeth struggled to say, before his knees gave way beneath him and he sat down into an ignoble, strangling crash to the floor. He kicked feebly at the floor once, but then did not move again.

Storm got up off the table, herself once more. The pain in her hands was a raging fire, but already they were beginning to heal, ashes falling away as her skin began to creep back over the seared bones.

The Zhents had fallen back to the far reaches of the room, and were eyeing the door but making no charge toward it yet. The small, cold-eyed assembly of servants that had just gathered out of nowhere to stand blocking it, a glittering array of weapons in their hands, might have had something to do with that.

The Bard of Shadowdale kept her eyes on the only man still standing close to her. The man who'd thrown the dagger just now. A Zhentarim slyblade named Thone.

"I believe," she said calmly, drifting toward him as gracefully as if she wore a High Lady's gown, "you owe me some money. Ten silver, was it not?"

The assassin held up empty hands in a gesture of surrender. "Lady Storm," he gasped, "I'd never have lifted a hand against you, had I known—"

She crooked an eyebrow, not slowing her deliberate advance.

Thone swallowed, licked his lips, and said, "Ah, just kill me quickly—please." He backed away from her, pushing the air with his hands as if he could somehow slow her down. "There's just one thing I'd like to know before I die," he blurted out, looking into her angry eyes. "How did you know?"

"Know about *what*?" Storm snapped, advancing on him like a stalking cat.

"Th-that I write the Heartsteel books," he replied, as the color slowly fled from his face in fear. "I'm almost done with one now ..."

"You write the Heartsteel—?"

"*Heart in a Clenched Gauntlet, Kisses Like Iron, Black-serpent's Caress, Redwurm's Revenge*, yes, yes," Thone quavered. "*Tower Sundered at Twilight, The Dragon's Gentle Claw* ..."

As Storm Silverhand took him by the throat, she murmured, "Well, now. Well, now ..."

A smile rose to her lips, and she added pleasantly, "You've afforded my sister Sylune and myself much amusement. Perhaps even, at times, when you meant to. For this, you may live."

Startlement showed in his eyes—in the instant before the left hook that had started near her knees took him under the chin, snapping his head back as if it belonged to a wooden doll and not a living man.

The Bard of Shadowdale caught the slyblade as he slumped, and heaved him up into the air with another rippling of muscles. She slung Thone's limp body over one shoulder and strode to the door, where a grim-faced cook

was wiping his hands on his apron amid a wall of somber servants.

Storm glanced down at her hands—still grotesque, but no longer burned to the bone—then up at the cook. "Rendal," she said gently, "You can take them all down now."

The cook saluted her, as one Harper to another, and nodded his head at the slyblade's dangling form. "Him, too?"

Storm smiled. "No. He lives." Rendal Ironguard nodded, turned, and made two swift signals with his hands. The servants surged into life, charging across the room at the remaining Zhents.

"Harpers all," Storm murmured, watching the tumult.

Screams came to her ears from below as the pitched battle spread. There'd be fleeing guests all over Northend in a few minutes, but her folk knew their Zhents. Such open violence was a crude lapse of style, but necessary—the more so if she was going to be busy chasing down a truly mighty wizard.

"This pity, truly," she told the senseless man on her shoulder, "that so few servants are to be had for hire in the dales. One ends up having to accept almost anyone."

She gave Thone an experimental shake to be sure he was securely seated—and truly deep in his temporary retreat from the world—and started down the stairs. That cloakroom would do to strip him of strangling cords and hidden knives and suchlike, then Sylune could keep him hard at work on Heartsteel epics, back at the farm, while Storm went hunting Halasters.

"I hear they're bad at this time of year," she remarked brightly to a terrified Zhentarim who came pounding up the stairs at that moment—before she put her boot in his face and sent him plunging back down onto the blades of the Harpers pursuing him.

"Boys, boys—no fires, now!" Storm warned the Harpers grinning at her. They saluted her and clattered back down the stairs. Someone screamed in the room behind her, and

someone else struck a wall with a crash that made her wince.

One of these days the Zhentarim might just learn patience enough not to get in each other's way all the time, and plunge into carrying out plans they hadn't finished considering the consequences of. If they ever did that, the dales might truly have something to fear.

Of course, to reach that level of competence, the Zhents were going to have to ferret out the Red Wizards and other traitors hiding in their midst, who customarily used them as dupes and clumsy weapons against folk in the Dragonreach lands. That and the tensions between Manshoon and Fzoul should keep them busy for a while yet...

"Sleeper, awake," Storm growled at the slyblade. "I've got to go hunting mad mages."

*Hubris is the shared chink in all our armor.*

Elminster's voice was a grudging growl in her mind. She could feel the warmth of his affection, and knew she'd started smiling.

Taerach Thone looked up fearfully from the far end of the kitchen table for perhaps the hundredth time. Almost unconsciously his hand dropped down to caress the hilt of the belt dagger they'd returned to him, then jerked back as if he'd committed a shameful crime. Storm sighed. Did he think she was going to tear him limb from limb, after carrying him all the way here, bathing him, and putting him to bed?

In her mind, she replied to Elminster, *And so?*

Through the link, she could see the Old Mage floating in the warm, dark room where the Weave surged and roiled like silent surf. Back to back, held pressed together in a human star, he and the Simbul were floating together, as he fed her from his own life-force. Let Mystra smile upon them both.

*Halaster likes to weave a little trap into his enchantments, to give his apprentices—or anyone else—*

*who breaks one of them a little slap of reproof, a jolt that tells the recipient whose lash they're feeling. Thus, a distinctive signature is woven into almost his every casting. In Undermountain, of course, they stand clustered and piled atop each other like pebbles on a beach. Outside of its passages, those who use Weavesight can easily find the work of Halaster.*

*Does it seem so sensible to you, El, Storm replied, that I, among the weakest of us Chosen in the Art, should be the one to go hunting Halaster Blackcloak? If defeating this cabal matters, shouldn't one of us who might have a real hope of victory against him be the one to—?*

*Halaster is waiting for just such a battle, ready with spells hung to trigger other spells in a nasty little inferno. If I pile protections upon ye—protections that need not be set aside to allow ye to hurl spells out at him—I can keep ye alive long enough to reach him.*

*And do what? she asked. Slay him? Mystra above, man, he controls more gates to other planes and places than either of us know. The stability of some cellars in Waterdeep, and the buildings and streets above them, depend on his enchantments. To say nothing of the fact that he polices Undermountain better than any of us ever could, and could ravage any place we fought with the spells he carries—and the contingencies that will be triggered if he dies!*

*Gently, lass, gently there. He's not acted like this before. I think someone has a hold over him, and I need ye to find out whom, and to deal with it.*

*I'm not sure I'm looking forward to dealing with anyone—or anything—that can maintain a hold over Halaster Blackcloak.*

Grim and rueful that sounded, even to her. Storm took two strides over to a pot that needed stirring before it overflowed, felt the anxious eyes of Taerach Thone on her again, and added, *Wouldn't I be better employed tracking*

*down the rest of this little group? They won't all retire instantly the moment we remove the mages from their midst, you know. I sometimes think we live in a Faerun far removed from the real one. We always have spells and mages and potential castings and abuses on our minds, when most folk worry about being too cold or not having enough to eat, or about cruel laws and crueller armsmen coming to back them up.*

*So we do. It's another failing we share. Elminster's voice in her mind was calm, almost weary. Are ye getting too tired for this, Storm? Shall I leave off pestering ye?*

*Nay, nay, Old Mage. Never leave off pestering me. It's all I have left of my childhood.*

He chuckled, then, and Storm staggered as he thrust a whirlwind of flashing lines and knots of force into her mind. Thone tensed, as if to rise, but sat back when she gave him a glare and shook her head.

*Blood of Mystra, El, what in the name of all tankard-tapping trolls was that?*

*Halaster's signature. Got it?*

*My mind feels as if it's swollen with child—a kicking child, she replied. Yes, I have it, Lady smite thee.*

*Good. Now, get out thy trivet.*

*My trivet? Old Mage ...?*

*I took the liberty, lass, upon my last biscuit-snatching sweep through thy kitchen, of doing a casting.*

*On my trivet. Well, it's nice to know archmages have enough to do, to fill up their gray-whiskered, dragging days. Once they get tired of taking on attractive young apprentices.*

*Don't claw, lass, 't isn't pretty. Got it out yet?*

*Of course.*

Storm let all the sarcasm she could muster drip through those two words, but Elminster's voice rolled on as gently as if he'd never heard her. *Put thy hand upon it and tell Sylune not to be alarmed if a few sparks come out of ye. Eyes,*

*nose, mouth—that sort of thing. You'll be needing a fair cloak of spells upon ye to go up against Halaster. This may take some time. If ye've something on the stove, move it off.*

Storm sighed and did as she was told. Thone's eyes grew large and round at what she said then, but he said nothing—even when the fingertips of a hand rose out of the ironwork to clasp Storm's hand, and the Bard of Shadowdale stiffened, every hair on her body shot out straight, and her bare feet rose gently to hover a few feet off the kitchen floor. Sylune had to give him a warning murmur to keep him in his seat, however, when lightning began to play around Storm's toes.

Sylune let her head loll onto her shoulder as she slumped down in the old high-backed armchair, and after a short time let gentle snoring sounds come out of her. She needed no spell to feel the frowning gaze of Taerach Thone on her, nor to hear the faint rattle of his quill going into the drip bottle. Slyblades learn to move with infinite care and stealth. Sylune barely heard him pass by her and out the door. She waited until he was three catlike steps down the passage before drifting up from her body to follow him, invisible and curious.

Beyond the grain sacks piled ceiling-high at one end, waiting for the harvest a season away, the room was empty except for the floating woman.

A faint, flickering glow outlined Storm Silverhand, and stole out to fade just shy of the corners of the room. She was floating in midair, flat on her back and about chest high off the floor.

Thone took a cautious step away from the door he'd just slipped through, and peered to see if her eyes were open or shut. He felt somehow more comfortable when he saw that her eyes were closed. She seemed more alert than truly asleep; in a trance, perhaps. There was a very faint humming—almost a singing—coming from her body. It was



coming from all over her, not her mouth alone. This must be the hunt for Halaster she'd mentioned to her sister. The hunt that would doom someone, if it succeeded.

Thone took a step closer to the floating woman, and watched her silver hair warily. It rippled in a rhythmic pulse, unchanged by his presence. He licked dry lips and cast a swift glance back at the door behind him.

All was silence and emptiness. He'd slipped away from the sleeping witch, and was now free to slay a woman Manshoon himself was said to fear. Whenever a scheme to seize the dale was advanced, it was said, and the inevitable plot to draw the mage Elminster elsewhere was outlined, Manshoon always murmured, "But there are harps ... all too many serve Storm in that dale. What of her?"

It would take only a few moments. Immortal or not, no woman could live on with her head cut from her body. Thone stroked the handle of his dagger as he stood over her, looking down.

Aye, they'd given him back his belt blade. Why? Were these women so stupid, or so proud in their power? How many hundred years did the bards insist they'd been alive in Faerun?

There must be a trap. Some spell or other to smash him away into the nearest wall if he drew steel here. Yet, what magic could possibly flare up swiftly enough to stop him ripping open her throat?

With a sudden swift, darting movement he drew his dagger and hefted it in his hand, seeing the reflected glow gleam back at him from it. He held his breath, but, as the seconds passed, nothing happened. He sighed out air, and started to breathe again. So, steel was drawn and he yet lived.

There were mages back in the citadel who grew pale at the mere mention of the Bard of Shadowdale. There were men in Teshwave who spat curses and fingered old scars

when the Harpers of Shadowdale were mentioned, and men around the fires spoke of "the undying Storm" who led them.

And there was Ridranus to avenge.

Taerach Thone's lips tightened, and he raised his weapon. He never saw Sylune drifting with him, because there was nothing to see. She glided in to encircle his wrist as mist too soft to feel—yet—and called up the magics she'd need to blast him in an instant, Heartsteel sequels or no Heartsteel sequels.

Taerach Thone held his glittering dagger ready and looked down at the floating woman. A kind of wonder grew in his face, as the long, silent seconds passed. Then, in a sudden, almost furious movement, he thrust his dagger back into its sheath and stepped back.

He raised his hand in a sort of salute before he slipped back out of the room, as softly and as silently as he'd come.

"Off you go," Sylune said gently, as she drew back from the kiss and turned away. Behind her, without sound or fuss, Storm Silverhand abruptly vanished. The Witch of Shadowdale let the spell-glow fade from around her wrists and gave the watching slyblade a wry smile. "Seen enough for a few good scenes yet?" Thone shook his head, disbelief in his eyes. "Lady," he said hesitantly, "what I'd heard about you silver-haired sisters was far indeed from what I've seen here. I ... you even have *all* of my books in the kitchen. I'm still a little stunned that you trust me here."

Sylune smiled. "You've earned it."

"I have?"

"In this room, not so long ago, when you drew your dagger and didn't use it," the Witch of Shadowdale said crisply, as she swept out the door.

Thone gaped at her departing back, went as pale as old snow, then, moving in sudden haste, followed her back to the kitchen. When he got there, the room was empty of witches, but a warm mug of soup was waiting by his chair. It smelled wonderful.

The tall, gaunt man hummed to himself as he drew forth small folded scraps of parchment from the crevices of a carved face on the door of a certain vault, unfolded and read them, and either slid them back into their resting places or replaced them with other folded messages. A ring like a great green beetle shone on his finger in the faint glow of the tomlight enchantments as he worked, rapidly filling a small, hovering tray.

Such a scene could be observed nightly, by those able to win past the forbidding guards of many a priest, in most of the crypts in the City of the Dead. However, these parchments were not prayers, and the white-haired man in the tattered brown robes was no priest.

Moreover, he had no guards. A dark shimmering in the air around him kept wandering mourners at bay even more effectively. He was always alone, no matter how frenetic bustling Waterdeep might become, close around him.

Reading the little missives always amused him. The writers went to such great lengths to make them cryptic to all who weren't part of the group, in case they fell into other hands. Neither Labraster nor the growling woman—Malsander, that was her name—had picked up their messages for a long while, now. Perhaps he should . . . but no. What these fools did to make themselves feel important mattered not a whit to him.

Only the dark bidding that drove him mattered, and the fascination he shared with it. That silv—

A small sound came to his ears from just behind him, and Halaster Blackcloak whirled around. Something soft brushed his cheek, something that made his skin tingle, and he found himself staring into the dark, merry eyes of a woman with silver hair, whose nose was almost touching his own. She was as tall as he, and clad in foresters' leathers that had seen much use. She spread empty hands to show him that she held no weapon, though he could see a long sword scabbarded at one hip, and daggers riding in at least

three places. His face grew hard nonetheless. She should not have been there.

She should not have been able to step through his spellsmoke. No one not mighty in Art should be able to pass through it. She should not be unfamiliar to him and yet, of course, she must be one of the Seven Sisters, one not often seen in Waterdeep.

Therefore—he sighed—he must essay the inevitable: "Who are you?"

He made his voice as cold and unwelcoming as he felt. Perhaps he could bargain for a taste of what he sought, before things came to battle. To do that, this intruder must be made to feel beholden.

"One who wonders why the great Halaster consorts with reckless Thayan fools, drow, and sneak thieves," Storm replied in level tones. Her eyes flicked to the floating tray. "And reads their mail," she added, her voice firm and yet cool.

Halaster frowned at her, lifting a hand to his tingling cheek. She must have ... kissed him?

"I'm not accustomed to bandying words with overbold lasses, whate'er their obvious charms," he said coldly, "or the greatness they may think long years grants them. Render unto me your name, and the truth as to why you are here and what you've just done to me, or I'll blast you down into lasting torment as a crippled serpent under my boots."

"Now *that's* a charming maiden-catching manner," Storm replied.

The Mad Mage said not a word in reply, nor made any gesture that she could see, but from his fingertips lightning leaped, crackling at her in angry chorus. Its snarling and spitting rose loud in her ears, and the force of its fury made her body shake, yet she strode through it unafraid to push his out thrust hand aside.

"You'll have to do better than that," she murmured into his face.

Was she reaching her lips up to his? Gods, yes—

Halaster's eyes narrowed, and he made a quick, flicking gesture with one finger. The tomblight failed, the tray plummeted to ring on the flagstones underfoot, and the world exploded into white roaring flame.

When its fury died, Storm could tell from the surging and eddying around her that the outermost of Elminster's shieldings had been shredded, and now clung to her limbs on the verge of flickering collapse. Yet she smiled easily, knowing she had to goad him.

"Is that all? Be not timid, Blackcloak!" she said heartily, her innocent enthusiasm as much a taunt as if she'd spat curses at him.

The world exploded into purple fire this time.

Its fury was such that Storm found herself on one knee when it faded, her ears ringing, her eyes blurred with tears, and another two shieldings gone. Halaster was glaring at her with a sort of angry triumph, but she made herself rise, give him a pitying smile, and say, "Ah, but archmages certainly aren't what they were when I was but a little lass."

She fought her way through the swirling claws that he conjured next, ignoring the places where they stabbed through her last few shieldings to draw cold and bloody slices across her arms, shoulders, and thighs. When she brushed blindly against Halaster, Storm put her arms around him in a lover's embrace, entwining her legs around his.

He growled in fear and distaste, and she found herself grasping a sphere of bony plates surmounted by many staring eyestalks. She hissed in distaste, pulling her head back from the thrusting eyes even as she clung hard to the spicy-smelling beholder.

It shifted and wriggled under her, and became a barbed, conelike bulk whose tail stabbed at her repeatedly. The jaws that split the top of the cone snarled and tried to bite her, as the four arms that fringed it strained to pull her into its mouth. Storm clung close to the sharp body, wincing

at the gashes it dealt, and found herself clawing to keep her hold on the smooth scales of a twisting serpent whose wings crashed against her in a furious flailing. Jaws snapped in vain and smoking green spittle flew.

The serpent became a white-haired man again, snarling, "Why did you kiss me, wench? What do you want?"

"I kissed you to set a hook in you, Halaster," Storm told him, "to stay with you no matter what transformations you work, or where you hurl us. If your spells hurt me, the same hurts shall also make you suffer."

"But why?"

"I want to know why Halaster Blackcloak became part of this cabal whose folk are so clumsy, and whose work is so far from what has concerned you for so long. Why are you meddling in backstreet taverns in Scornubel and aiding slavers in the cellars of Waterdeep? How does a mighty wizard gain anything by such work?"

Their surroundings suddenly changed. The tomb was gone, whirled away in a smoky chaos that revealed a dark, echoing, water-dripping place somewhere underground, with a purple glow in its distant reaches.

"Behold and learn then, Chosen of Mystra," Halaster hissed. "Come."

They moved together, bodies entwined as they drifted along on a spell breeze, up to the source of the glow. It was a simple, massive black block of stone, lying like a lone, gigantic clay brick on the floor, the purple glow swirling restlessly in the air just above it. There were no graven runes, and no braziers or anything else that Storm could see, yet she knew she was looking upon an altar—an altar to Shar.

"You've taken to worship in your declining days?" she asked, making her voice sharp with incredulity. Goad, then goad some more.

"The Goddess ... of the Night . . . ?" Halaster gasped, seeming to suddenly have to struggle to speak, "desires—"

He gurgled and choked for some time, but as Storm clung to him, she did not think he was descending into one of his bouts of madness. No, some entity was trying to master him, to prevent the trembling wizard from saying something he very much wanted to say.

She dared to stroke him with a soothing hand, and whisper the release of a small purgative spell she carried for banishing diseases and infections. Halaster shuddered under her, as if he were a frightened horse, and Storm realized they'd somehow ended up lying on the altar together—or rather, the archmage was lying on it, and she was clinging to him.

"—desires... what I do!" Halaster snarled, then twisted under her like a frenzied thing, biting and bucking and kicking.

His magic lifted them and whirled them over and over in the air. One of Storm's elbows struck the stone altar as they spun, and blazed up into numb fire. Her hold slipped, and like a striking snake Halaster was out and over her and slamming her down onto the altar with all the magical force he could muster. Purple fires flowed hungrily over them both.

Storm bucked and twisted in turn, but the room was shaking with the force of the magic now roaring up out of the altar to augment Blackcloak's spell. Her shoulders were pinned to the warm, throbbing stone as if all of Mount Waterdeep were gripping her and holding her there.

Halaster clambered down off her slowly amid the streaming purple flames, his eyes bright. Storm saw that he was looking at the places on her body that he'd bitten, and where his spell-claws and stinging tail had drawn blood. Thin threads of silver fire were rising up into the roiling purple radiance from them, as if milked forth.

"The silver fire," Halaster whispered, thrusting his face close to Storm. "Shar wants it even more than I, and took to

riding my mind not so long ago, stealing in when I was ... away."

He stretched forth a trembling hand to a tiny wound his teeth had made high on her shoulder, and gasped, "Give it to me. *Give it to me!*"

"Halaster," Storm told him, "you have but to serve Mystra to gain it, obeying her as we Seven have chosen to do, but Our Lady shall never surrender it to such as Shar."

The purple radiance flared up and seared away darkening, fading shieldings then, smiting her all over as if with many smiths' hammers. Storm was shaken like a leaf in its pounding, bone-shattering fury.

Halaster stared down at her as if in amazement, as the silver fire his finger had touched was snatched away from him by the rushing purple flames. He looked for a moment as if he wanted to cry, then to chortle in glee. As Storm watched him, through the roaring and her pain, his face twisted and trembled. He barked, suddenly, like an angry, excited dog, then threw back his head and bayed before hurling himself on the woman struggling on the altar, twisting and panting and clawing at her. Sharp pains faded as his hungry hands clutched her broken bones, and they shrank away, healing at his touch.

The archwizard's furious assault dragged her off the stone into a helpless tumble, and instantly Storm could breathe—and scream out her pain—again. Purple fire stabbed forth in angry fingers to claw at the whimpering bard and the puzzled-looking wizard as they stared into each other's eyes, locked in a frozen embrace, and Halaster asked in a very quiet, precise voice, "Excuse me, but are you one of my apprentices? I don't believe I've had the pleasure —"

"No, and I'm thinking you won't be having it any time soon, Blackcloak," Storm hissed into his startled face, "if you don't get us both back out of here—*now!*"



It was a gambit that almost worked. The mad archwizard frowned thoughtfully, as if trying to remember something, lifted one hand to trace something in the air, then shook his head and said in quite a different voice, "Oh, no, I don't think I could do that."

"Halaster!" Storm roared at him, slapping his face as the purple fire rose into a shrieking howl, tugging at them enough to drag them a few inches across the stone floor. "Listen to me!"

"Thy voice is tarble upon the ears, jibby, yet thou'rt strange to me. Yield thy name, I pray," he quavered in reply, his voice different again. Storm growled, wrapped her arms and legs around him as if he were a pole she was trying to slide down, and rolled their locked bodies over and over, away from the altar.

The last of Elminster's shieldings slid away from around Storm as they went, passing into her in a healing that banished pain and brought back vigor from end to end of her body. She almost laughed aloud at the sheer pleasure it brought.

Halaster burst into angry tears, like a child who's had a toy snatched from him, and was clawing at her again. "Give it!" he sobbed. "Give it back!"

The threads of silver fire were gone, vanished with her healing. Snarling and barking, the wizard became a great black wolf, then a thing of talons and scales, panting, "Shrivel! Shred! Shatter!"

"Sylune," Storm told the room grimly, as fresh fires in her breast announced that the claws had torn open her flesh once more, "you've a lot to answer for. Next time, call on someone else."

Silver smoke billowed up from her in a bright glow, and Storm fought to slap away Halaster's head as it became snouted and many-fanged once more, and promptly snapped at her. She never saw the deeper darkness gather

above the altar, and slowly open two cold, glittering eyes of dark purple.

Halaster's head was now a thing of questing tentacles, darting at her eyes and up her nostrils, sliding in a surge of cold slime into her ears.

In the gloom of the temple under Waterdeep, there came a shining forth of the Weave. The air filled with the bright sweep of a glittering net of glowing stars, stars that threw back the darkness and the purple orbs as two blue-white eyes, each as large as a coach, opened briefly to regard the struggling humans.

When the blue-white radiance faded, the bard and the wizard twisted and strained in darkness, their only light the sparks and tongues of silver fire leaking from between them.

The purple glow returned briefly, flaring up like a flame on the altar, but the blue-white flash that came out of nowhere to slash at that flame was so bright and sudden that the stone of the altar groaned aloud, and smaller stones fell from the ceiling here and there, clattering down around the two humans.

Storm and Halaster panted and struggled against each other for a long time before silver radiance flared. The Mad Mage hissed at the pain it brought him as he tried to lap at it, his wolf head sporting an impossibly long tongue. His other limbs had become snakelike coils, each wrapped thickly around one of Storm's broken limbs. She lay helpless under him, spread-eagled on the stones with her front laid open down past her navel. Silver fire flared up around her heaving, glistening internal organs in an endless, pumping sequence of dancing flames. More flames licked out between her parted, whimpering lips, and the hungry wizard bent his head to feed.

Unheeded, the stones between them and the altar were heaving upward, as if something long and snakelike were reaching out from under the freshly cracked block of stone, burrowing along at a speed no mole had ever reached. The

line of heaving stones was heading straight for the spot where the helpless Chosen of Mystra lay.

"What's happening?" Thone asked, as Sylune swayed and Thone threw up her hands. "Can I help?"

Blue-white fire spiraled around her, rising up with a muted scream, and Thone found himself trembling from the sheer force of magic rushing through the room—Art that howled and roared up, then was gone.

In the sudden stillness, Sylune let her arms fall back to her sides and sighed. Thone found he could move again, and that he felt very sad. As the Witch of Shadowdale walked to the window end of the kitchen, all the light in the room seemed to move with her, leaving him in deep shadow.

The Zhentarim slyblade stared down at his hands, and found that they were shaking, and that he was struggling on the edge of bursting into tears.

In a lamp-lit chamber in southern Thay a man stiffened, lifted his head sharply, then sketched two swift gestures in the air.

"As you wish, holy Shar," he whispered to the empty air around him, an instant before the lights in his eyes went out forever. He toppled onto his side with no more sound than a whisper, as if he were made of paper.

An apprentice looked up sharply, in time to see the body of his master settle onto the rugs like a dry, hollow husk. Empty eye sockets stared up into the lamplight forever.

In two places not so far apart, sudden blue-white fire swirled, and two men found they hadn't even time to open their mouths and exclaim before the fire was gone again, and they were somewhere else.

They were somewhere underground—a chamber of dark stone where Dauntless and Mirt stood gaping at each other, then at the sole source of light in the room, a few paces away. Fitful silver fire rose from a silver-haired figure who lay sprawled on her back, gasping feeble plumes of flame as a

monster crouched atop her, licking at the fire that rose from her.

"Ye gods!" Mirt snarled, as he bounded forward, past a racing upheaval of stones. He thrust his trusty dagger into the beast's nearest eye.

Dauntless said less and ran faster. His sword took the squalling creature in the throat, thrusting twice as it collapsed forward onto the woman. The stones of the floor rose up like a clutching hand around them both, creaking and rumbling.

With startled oaths the two Harpers kicked aside stones and stabbed down into what flared up from beneath. It seemed no more than glowing purple smoke, but it ate away their blades as if it were acid, spewing sparks at their every thrust. Wordlessly they dropped useless hilts into it and snatched out dagger after dagger, thrusting like madmen into the empty, glowing air they stood on, until at last the purple radiance flickered and faded.

It seemed to retreat back into crevices beneath the floor stones, and Dauntless eyed it narrowly as Mirt plucked aside the beast's shoulder, which seemed to dwindle under his fat and hairy hand.

At another time, the wheezing moneylender might have stopped to peer curiously at the vanishing monster. Now, however, as snakelike tentacles melted away, he had eyes for nothing but the white, drawn face coming into view from beneath it.

"Storm Silverhand!" Mirt swore, and scrabbled among secret places in his worn and flapping breeches for one of the potion vials he always carried. "Help me, lad!" he panted, crashing down to his knees beside the sprawled, ravaged body of the Bard of Shadowdale. "She's—"

Dauntless had already kicked aside the monster's body, staring curiously at what it had become—a gaunt old man whose face he did not know—and was now staring past Mirt

at something else. He threw the dagger in his hand hard into the darkness.

The moneylender's shaggy head whirled around to see what the younger Harper had attacked. He was in time to see a man he knew catch the dagger and close his hand over it with a mocking smile. Purple light—the same hue as the radiance they'd just been hacking at—flared up between those closed fingers and the dagger faded away into nothingness.

*"Labraster!"* Mirt roared.

Auvrarn Labraster struck a pose, raising one hand in a lazy salute. Those handsome, crookedly smiling features were unmistakable, even with Labraster's eyes glowing eerily purple. The merchant put out his other hand, pointing fingers at both men, and purple lightning snarled forth.

Dauntless dodged and rolled. Snarling purple fire leaped after him, clawing and spitting at his heels. Mirt, on his knees and no longer a slender and agile man even to the most flattering observer, was struck instantly, and could be heard roaring weakly amid the raging lightning. As Mirt sagged, curling up in pain, Labraster flung both hands around to point squarely at Dauntless. The Harper cried out as he went down, writhing and convulsing helplessly in a splashing sea of purple fire.

Auvrarn Labraster threw back his head and laughed exultantly. His eyes were blazing almost red as he lowered his gaze slowly to the still figure of Storm Silverhand, sprawled on the floor with her exposed lungs fluttering only faintly.

"Any last comments, bard?" he jeered, striding forward with his hands trailing twin streams of purple fire onto the stones as he went.

Storm turned her head with an effort, lifted clouded eyes to his, and murmured, "I'm not enjoying this."

Labraster threw back his head and laughed uproariously.

He was still guffawing helplessly when the glistening point of a slender sword burst out of his throat from behind. Purple fire howled around the toppling merchant, then was gone, shrinking back beneath the stones with a suddenness that was almost deafening.

Storm, Mirt, and Dauntless alike peered through mists of pain to watch him fall. Standing in the shadows behind him was a slender figure they all knew, who lifted his eyebrows to them in sardonic salute as he deftly cut a slice from the back of Auvrarn Labraster's shirt, speared it on his bloodied blade, and tossed it aloft to wipe his blade clean with.

"If I desired my little empire of sewers to be full of goddesses, archwizards, and Chosen of Mystra," Elaith Craulnobar murmured, "I'd have invited them."

As if in reply, there came a sudden roaring from the altar, as purple flame leaped up through its cracks to gather above it.

"Back!" Mirt cried feebly. "Help me get Storm back!"

Dauntless rose unsteadily and staggered across the riven floor of the temple. He was still a good way from where the fat merchant was trying to shield the Bard of Shadowdale with his own body when another figure rose up, its movements stiff and yet trembling with pain.

Halaster Blackcloak was as white as a corpse. He paid no attention to anything in the room except the altar as he lifted unsteady hands and said a single harsh word. A wave of something unseen rolled away from him, and the altar burst apart into rubble and dust. Purple flame shot up to the ceiling, emitting a howl of fury, and from its height turned and shot out like a bolt of lightning.

The Serpent and the Harpers watched doom come for Halaster Blackcloak. When the purple fires struck and raged, the archwizard reeled but kept his feet. They saw him throw back his head and gasp in pain, but they also saw a lacing of blue-white fire dancing around his brow that had not been

there a moment before. It persisted until the purple flame had spat and flickered back into Darkness. When it faded, Halaster Blackcloak went with it.

He looked last down at Storm Silverhand, and they quite clearly heard him say, "I am done with cabals and dark goddesses. Sorry, Lady of Shadowdale," before he disappeared.

Silence fell once more in the ruined temple, and with it came the gloom. Once again the only light came from the feeble tongues of silver flame rising from Storm.

Bright radiance burst forth a little way behind Dauntless. The Lady Mage of Waterdeep stood at its heart with a wand flickering in her hand. "Sister," she said, "I am come!"

There was another flash beside Elaith, who drew back smoothly and lifted his blade for a battle, frowning.

Taerach Thone stood blinking at them all. He held a piece of flickering stone in one of his open hands, and a ghostly lady was perched prettily in the cradle his arms formed. "Sister," Sylune said to Storm, "I am here too."

"You don't suppose," Mirt grunted, "one of you oh-so-mighty lasses could lend a hand, here? She's dying faster'n my potions can keep her alive!"

The Zhentarim slyblade tossed something across the room to the Old Wolf. "Here," Thone called, "have my potion. It can be trusted."

More than one pair of eyebrows rose at that, in the moments before the air began to shimmer in earnest, and tall, silver-haired women began to appear on all sides.

Elaith Craulnobar stiffened at the sight of a white-bearded, hawk-nosed mage in worn robes and a crooked, broad-brimmed hat... and stiffened still more at the sight of a drow priestess whose brief black garment bore the shining silver sword and moon of Eilistraee. Her eyes caught and held his as she stepped forward out of the swirling magic that had brought her, and strode gracefully toward him.

His blade was raised against her, but Qilue Veladorn walked unconcernedly onto it and came on. It passed through her as if she was smoke, but her hand, when it touched his cheek, was solid enough.

"It seems you are one of those who deserves a kiss of thanks, on behalf of a goddess . . . and a sister," she said, making the words a soft challenge.

There was no time for him to call on any magic or to break away. The elf whom men called the Serpent swallowed once, then turned his head slightly to meet the lips descending to his. They were cool, but her mouth and tongue were warm. Deliciously warm.

It was a long time before they broke apart—time enough for Storm to rise to her feet and join an interested, chuckling audience. It was an audience Elaith had no trouble ignoring as he drew back, and found Qilue's brow arched in another challenge.

There was a time when he'd have spat in the face of a drow. There was a time when he'd have offered swift death to anyone who seized on his person in such a way, leaving him so open to danger. There'd been a time when his pride

...

But here in this damp, ruined room, this day, Elaith Craulnobar sighed, smiled, and told the drow priestess, "I hope you realize that, after this, tomorrow is going to be truly boring."